



‘The Free Mothers’: pronatalism and working women in industry at the end of the last war in Britain by Denise Riley

What exactly is the cause?

Comforts for free mothers – I mean mothers of the free nations.

Graham Greene,
The Ministry of Fear (1943) Ch. 1.

The questioner here is Greene's hero; the reply comes from a supporter of the Dark Front Organisation, the ‘Comforts for Mothers of the Free Nations Fund’. I'll abandon Greene's internationalist ironies here, but I'll keep hold of the phrase ‘the free mothers’ to put it to use in a different set of ironies and political complexities.

In asking whether the employment of married and unmarried women in the last war, including a proportion of mothers in both groups, made any difference to suppositions about ‘women’s place’, we’re entering a dense tangle of labour requirements, shifts in State suppositions about the family and the care of children, the nature of terms like popularisation, propaganda, ideology, and the business of deciphering wants and needs. For example, was the postwar withdrawal of nurseries, and the later reinstatement of the ideal of the mother at home with the child, a sealing-over of a surface which had been only superficially scarred by the peculiarities of the war economy?

To start with an explanation, I came in the first place to the set of problems about ‘free mothers’ not as a historian, but through trying to make sense of my own history as a ‘single parent’ relying on State provisions in the shape of nurseries and welfare benefits. But biography apart, anyone now locating themselves in feminism and in socialism is forced to examine the whole nature and concept of the State, State welfare, and the formation of family policies, as well as battling over their practical incarna-

tions. Thinking about the current availability of work and childcare leads back to speculating about an earlier period of intensive employment for women: the gross event of a world war in which the demand for a labour force could, for a time, override the sexual division of labour of a 'normal' economy. The provision of war nurseries and their postwar demise is a striking by-product of this: it was to the history of these nurseries that I was first drawn.⁽¹⁾

The lot of working mothers in wartime and after points up the cracks in social policy addresses to 'the family' which speak as if the interests and needs of women, men, and children were always harmoniously unified. Mothers who work strain these assumptions of unity. One aim of this paper is to try to show how 'the free mothers' of the 1940s were pinned down by that very status as mothers, both as war-workers and after the war, in ways which were ultimately damaging from any liberationist or even egalitarian perspective.

The first section gives a rough account of the paid work done by women with children during the war. It discusses what sense we can make of the contemporary sociological investigations of women's post-war work intentions. There was a break, a famous break, between the level of wartime and of postwar provision of childcare facilities for working women: the establishing and withdrawal of war nurseries. All this took place against myriad programmatic pronouncements, on the part of a wide sweep of parties and interests, about the 'freeing' of mothers from the intolerable drudgery of unrelieved childcare, including by means of nurseries.

The second section looks at the ways in which these 'free mothers' were to be released only into a more relaxed and wholehearted supporting of the family, to be freed into having more children. Both during the war, and most strikingly just after it the reproductive woman at the heart of the family policy is surrounded by the language of pronatalism.

By pronatalism, I mean that despondency and alarm over the low birthrate, both past and as anticipated by demographers, which took the 'solution' to be the encouraging of women to have more children: four per family was a widely-agreed target. This anxiety and this proposal for its remedy (as distinct from any economic analysis) had been building up in the 1930s, but became more generally diffused towards the end of the war. I'll say more about its details in Part Two below, but want to mention some wider problems about how to understand it.

Pronatalist thought generated a great deal of language about 'the mother', not all of which was frankly reactionary, and much of which understood itself as progressive. It filled bits of the world with sound, while the birthrate crept quietly upwards. But the ubiquity of official nervousness about the falling population can't in itself be assumed to have affected women's reproductive behaviour one way or the other. Rhetoric doesn't make women have more children through the sheer power of the word. Nevertheless its presence matters politically (to put it mildly) and has to be assessed irrespective of whether or not it 'works' in the obvious sense.

This has to do with the general difficulty of how we understand the presence of 'bad language' in the world; how it both enters into and acts to form 'structures of feeling' (in Raymond Williams' phrase). How, exactly, are we to grasp the full force of what can be loosely referred to as a climate of pronatalist opinion? If we do not measure the political impact of pronatalism in terms of its demonstrable effects (most obviously, fluctuations of the birthrate), or if we cannot detect any such hard effects, how then do we make sense of its overall presence?

The presence alone of certain ways of speaking and writing in the world guarantees

nothing. Yet to stop at merely noting the pervasiveness of a particular discourse is to stop too soon. How best to make sense of the vast conceptual gaps between the equally uninviting options of either just hailing the existence of a discourse, or only assessing its quantifiable effects, I do not know. But understanding pronatalism demands thought about this. In this paper I edge towards a comment on a particular instance of pronatalism only; that damage was caused by the timing of British postwar pronatalism in the 1940s, in that for a brief period it sounded as if it spoke to the same needs for the 'protection of motherhood' about which various women's labour organisations had been agitating for decades. But the sources of its anxiety were different and transient. The temporary coincidence of verbal object – the mother – in the formulations of population policies, of social-democratic 'progressives' and of women's labour organisations brought about a stress on the mother as *real* worker in the home, equal, indeed, greater, in 'value' than the waged woman worker. In all this, the mother who did go out to work, and who consequently had different needs, became an impossibility, regarded by no-one. The possibility of speaking politically about *needs* became obscured by a passing rhetoric of maternal *function*.

This suggestion is a hesitant one on my part; to talk about rhetoric as having 'effects' needs some ideas of just *where* the effects are to be detected, and *how*. To say about post-war pronatalism 'yes, such language is reactionary, but we can demonstrate that it didn't affect women's behaviour one way or another', only fights shy of the problems. Can we accurately identify anything so unitary as a single rhetoric, and then discover whether forms of political speech – in the narrower sense of 'political' – engage head-on with it; or exist quietly in its shade; or adopt its intonations? A political language completely indifferent to such a socially-overshadowing rhetoric as that of postwar pronatalisms in Britain would be unlikely: then it's a matter of assessing the reasons for the *silence* of certain kinds of political speech towards it; or what critical distances others take from it.

It's possible to pick up enough evidence of some suspension of belief and a popular cynicism; but these alone can't guarantee resistance. Because an ideology is not wholeheartedly subscribed to that does not mean it is reassuringly without 'effects'.

My sense of it is that although in immediately-postwar Britain there are few traces of *direct* unease with pronatalism in the formal expressions of women's labour organisations – rather some understandable determination to exploit a climate for what it might usefully yield – its 'effects' are elsewhere altogether, and less susceptible to being read off from conference and branch reports. Instead they are oblique: in the field of political speech as silence, absence of challenge, indirection. Because the portrayals of postwar pronatalism were largely in key with other representations of family, home, and nation which *weren't* understood as objectionable, it was easier for them to get away unchallenged. Their impact lies in what is *not said*: as if they had acted to cover over a space, make certain objections unable to be raised or articulated. But a rhetoric could only ever have this power if accidentally allowed it by a previous set of failures: failures, in this case of postwar Britain, of radical analyses of the family, the nation, the State, the sexual division of labour. 'Good reasons' can be found for these absences, certainly. But that's a different point.

In the later sections of this paper, I touch on the possible sources for the rhetorical metaphor of the mother as worker, which held such sway in 1945/6 and had such a dulling presence in the formulations of political organisations, including women's labour organisations. For its implications were rarely refined to expose its contradictions.

My point is not that mothers are not workers in the obvious sense – far from it – but rather that a strong separation, even if at the level of language alone, between mothers (who are assumed to be always married and always at home) and women (who are assumed to be periodically at work) is both artificial and politically dangerous. Artificial, in that it overlooks the real drifts of the labour market (as it did in postwar Britain). And dangerous, in that it reinstates 'motherhood' as a functional value, while at the same time it works directly against any admission of the real needs of women with children. And, doing this, it confirms the most conservative understandings of gender, family, work, State, and how these stand in respect to each other. It also fits in with the 'stages' idea of women's work: that women's lives are stratified into work, then motherhood, then possible re-entry into the labour market. This supposition of neatly-autonomous strata runs against experience and fact: the layers are constantly flooded into each other; the histories and pressure of one shape and determine the others, and make certain theoretical 'choices' to work utterly impossible in practice.

Indifference to the complexity of work 'choices' is one inheritance of the postwar period: sociological works of the 1950s and 1960s, ostensibly drawing on the evidence of surveys during the late 1940s of working women's intentions, offer dazzlingly simple readings of the apparent postwar return to the home. Work like Geoffrey Thomas's survey (see below) is cited as objective contemporary evidence that women left paid employment because they did not want to work, period. The ambiguities of both the questionnaires and their responses are untouched. It is taken for granted that this evidence shows that women were glad to become housewives and mothers, and resumed these positions in a drift of pure freedom. There is no suggestion that the 'free mothers' did not operate in an ether of will alone, no suggestion that to refuse to be interested in long hours of almost-always full-time work at low rates and low skill with no childcare provision is a rational refusal. That so many younger married women after the war did seem to want to get home and stay there is taken to be a proof of an absolute lack of interest in any waged work under any terms, and as a confirmation of the naturalness of the desire to remain in a 'separate sphere'. 'The experience of the war' is taken, in the 1950s, as evidence of a set of essential truths about social organisation and sexual division of labour. In the specific case of childcare provision, indications of unease with the war nurseries on the part of working mothers were seized on as evidence of an absolute lack of desire for any, other than housebound, caring for children.

There is a problem of interpretation of all this from the point of view of post-1948 socialism and feminism: a dilemma of which expository path to follow. How far to rewrite the apparent conservatism of statements by women like 'a woman's first duty is to her husband and family', by replacing the conservatism with rationalism? That is, by arguing that women, already wholly responsible for housework and children, could not be expected to want to take on paid work too, in circumstances which would have led to exhaustion; why life at home *really was* more enticing anyway, a lesser evil. There seem, looking at the brief 1947 drive to get women back as 'operatives', enough 'material' reasons to explain the seeming indifference of women, younger ones especially, to this prospect. And one can invoke 'material' reasons too for the gradual return to the labour market at the end of the 1940s, reasons like financial need, the desire for company on the part of older women, and so forth. Although in this article I mostly pursue a simple version of this materialistic tack, partly to counter the 1940s war-heroine literature and the 1950s writing about the free choosers of hearth and

home, this version of 'materialism' has severe limitations as a mode of explanation. The last sections of this paper will go on with the point about the inadequacy of materialist pragmatics: but it needs some discussion about 'the family' and pronatalism before it can be extended.

My concluding suggestions mention the starting of a process of mutual re-writings, of the form 'psychology has shown'/'history has demonstrated', about the wants and needs of women and children in and out of the family. This process got underway in the 1940s and petrified in the 1950s; the point of breaking it open is to uncover more accurate political targets than those we inherit on the far side of the 1950s and 1960s. For post 1968 feminism has grown up with a depiction of a mass postwar return of women to the home after 1945, engineered by governmental deployment of maternal deprivation theories, advanced mainly by the psychologist John Bowlby.⁽²⁾ This depiction misleads in so far as it assumes a collusion between the State and a particular psychology; nor were the movements of the labour market for women so simply home-bound. The supposition that government and psychologist colluded to confine mothers also colours our understanding of the nature of 'the State' in relation to 'the family', to preserve a falsely-unitary sense of both. For in an analysis of what went on – and is going on – between labour requirements, welfare, governmental departments and women's work, or the lack of it, neither a unified 'State' nor an undifferentiated 'family' can usefully be allowed to exist.

In the case of the provision of wartime nurseries, for instance, 'the State' fragments into internal government politics, dissensions between Ministries of Health, Education, and Labour, reactions to pressures from industrialists, splits between central and local government authorities. As for 'the family' of immediately postwar family policy, the fiscal man and the reproductive woman and the stock of children are a multiple target; there is no symmetry between the man as wage-earner, and the woman as mother. The mother *as mother*, is, in 1945, being 'progressively' recognised as such: she stands side-by-side with her children in her own spotlight of planning and welfare. This is a double-edged illumination: for while a 'family policy' may hold genuinely emancipatory reforms, it acts at the same time to underwrite the woman-as-mother in particularly conservative ways, since conversely its address to women is always to reproductive married women who are wageless. Analogous, then, to other questions thrown up by the transitions of the war and postwar (like, under what political conditions could forms of education in motherhood *not* appear reactionary?) is the question: in what terms would – or could – a truly progressive family policy voice itself? Would it take the family as the true unit of society; or would it instead shake family members apart, and speak about the needs, and the clashes of needs, between ages and sexes?

I have had to miss out large amounts of material to which reference is necessary, especially concerning union policies, and the history of the TUC's position and impact over this period. There was of course far more at work and at issue than the strands of thought I have concentrated on here: what I have isolated is partial, and put forward in a provisional spirit to supplement other necessary ways of working. What is most needed now – and what must be in progress somewhere – is a clear overview and assessment of the significance and place of women's labour during the war years, and in the odd twilight between 1945 and 1951.

**"I START THE DAY WITH
A 30-SECOND BREAKFAST,"**

SAYS "MILKMAN" MRS. HUGHES of Hornsey, London.



HERE you see Mrs. Hughes, of London, N.8, a milk rounds-woman of nearly two years' standing, armed with her milk bottles and ready to go into action.

"I set out from the depot at 7.30 sharp every morning," says Mrs. Hughes, "and that means an even earlier start from home. But it doesn't worry me! We all have a 30-second breakfast of Kellogg's, so there's no rush and no bother. I get off to work in good time, and with flying colours because they give me so much energy."

Picture Post, January 23, 1943

**PART I
WOMEN AT WORK**

THE WORK OF MARRIED WOMEN IN INDUSTRY DURING THE WAR.

Numbers and previous work

On a rough estimate, at least threequarters of a million women working in industry during the war had children under 14. It is not possible to arrive directly at a more exact figure, since the Ministry of Labour did not collect statistics for the whole of the female work force by marital status and number of children (although the 1941 registrations of women under the Registration for Employment Order are analysed by marital condition).⁽³⁾ The usual source of information about numbers and ages of children, the Censuses of Population and certain other household surveys, do not exist for the war years; there was no 1941 Census. So it's only possible to make approximations by calculating from the information we have from limited sources. A survey by Geoffrey Thomas published in 1944 questioned over 2,000 women drawn from a wide scatter of factories and industries intended to be representative of the overall state of the female labour force; 34% of these had children under 14.⁽⁴⁾ Other estimates make it 38%;⁽⁵⁾ it seems safe to suppose that a very good third of the 2½ million women in industry had children at school or under school age. (At the peak of women's employment outside the home, Autumn 1943, some six million women were in civilian jobs. My remarks here are going to concentrate, however, on those in industry specifically).

Women with children under 14 were never conscripted, or subjected to the effective civilian conscription of the 1941 Registration for Employment Order and the 1942 Control of Engagement Order, which directed eligible women by age groups, and labour needs as perceived by the Ministry of Labour. Mothers who did work, then, had the status of volunteers; the ambiguities of this status will be discussed below. The

proportion of all married women with children engaged in war work is masked, too, by the amount of unpaid voluntary work done, even if on the fairly class-specific basis of organisations like the WVS (Womens' Voluntary Service). It is also hard to work out what proportion of mothers in the wartime industrial labour force were new workers; but proportions here varied so much on a regional basis and by the kind of employment that any overall figures would not be informative. Women's pre-war labour histories affected their reception of details like new nursery plans, as well as generally colouring their attitudes to and expectations of what they found themselves doing in the war. The enforced mobility which carried younger, single women in great swathes around the country at the behest of the Ministry of Labour did not affect women with children directly, nor did it affect soldiers' wives. As a character in Elizabeth Bowen's 1949 novel about wartime London observed,

a Mobile Woman dared not look sideways these days – you might find yourself in Wolverhampton (a friend of hers had) or at the bottom of a mine, or in the A.T.S. with some bitch blowing a bugle at you till you got up in the morning. It was well, she remarked, for Leonie being a soldier's wife, though if she had half a head on her shoulders she should have started a kid also!⁽⁶⁾

But married women were indirectly touched by all this shifting labour: for while aircraft production factories in the Midlands imported single women workers from Scotland and the North-East, thus changing the composition of the work-force for married women at both ends of that process, other areas (like London and the North-West) used a mix of locally available labour. Some factories could change their function and to some extent keep their original work-force, including their married women; soap-wrappers might become tool-makers, for instance.

At the start of the war, unemployment figures for women rose in non-essential employments: food, textiles, catering industries. Women from the Luton hat industry, for example, Lancashire cotton, Leicester shoe and hosiery factories became munitions workers. Thus any one work-force could be composed of women with very different histories of employment. A manager in 1941 noted amongst his new conscripted labour:

Scotch servant girls, from Dundee jute mills, from breweries in Sunderland, Irish girls of various types. Some were good, some bad, some indifferent. Scotch servant girls we found good hard workers. A Yorkshire girl was a hopeless case and had to be sent back home – pregnant. . . Two Irish girls came on night shift, smoked, idled and swore at the foreman, refusing to work . . . A hotel chambermaid; a sensible girl who'd made up her mind to do her job to the best of her ability and put up with the rough side of it. Note she's the domestic service type. This type is used to hard work and undefined hours of work at that.⁽⁷⁾

Married women interspersed with such managerial heart-sinkers were hailed as thoroughly reliable. The married woman as steady worker emerges through journalistic and managerial comment as an icon of decency and stability, sharply distinct from younger, single women. But remarks like, 'they seem to carry over their household pride into their job', 'these married women seem really keen to do the job somehow, and to keep at it' flattened the facts of the widely disparate work experiences of the married women in industry, and their pre-war labour history, if any.

Again, it's only possible to get a sense of the latter on a piecemeal basis; the variety of regional differences makes national figures for the previously-employed rather academic information. In the supposedly representative collection of women interviewed in Thomas' 1944 survey, nearly half of the older (over 35 years) married women, and a third of the younger ones, had been at home just before the war; but nine-tenths of all women had at some point in their lives previously done paid work. Few were absolutely new to any form of job at all. In some places women had been able to take up their old work again, or just continue with it; of the textile and clothing workers in Thomas' group, 78% had been in those occupations before the war. Most upheavals surrounded labour movements to engineering and metals; only 22% of women in those industries had any pre-war acquaintance with them; 51% had moved across from different work and 24%, mostly older married women, had come straight from home. These figures themselves, though, are the sum of a collection drawn from different factories in different parts of the country: they obscure sharp variations between one work-force and another, variations on both regional and factory bases.

Mass-Observation's *People in Production*, for instance, compares two extremes of 'morale' in two war factories. One factory was making life-saving devices and although it employed many new workers, it had 'a tradition of continuity of employment'. There was an active Works Council and:

morning and afternoon rest pauses, an excellent canteen, radio in the factory, an average wage of about £3 and upwards, lowish time rate . . . an excellent sick bay and a firm's doctor and dentist scheme.

The work-force of 1,000, almost all women, was credited with a strikingly cheerful enthusiasm for work by the Mass-Observation watchers. A Northern factory, by contrast, did similar production, but

has expanded with extreme rapidity after being plonked down in a small country village . . . Most of the labour force consists of women who only two years ago were country girls doing domestic service, farm jobs, and like work . . . The workers feel that the district has been invaded by the factory, which now dominates the area, but which will (they think) go away immediately after the war. Earnings for girls are up to £4 a week, and most of them have never seen so much money before in this village . . . There is very little union organisation. A particular difficulty here is that every worker has to sign an oath of secrecy, is not allowed to say anything about the work being done, under fear of prosecution. Secrecy must be observed even with one's family in the village . . . The management uses in conversation to describe the attitude of its workers the word 'cottonwoolliness'.⁽⁸⁾

Leaving aside, for the moment, criticisms which could be made of the use of 'morale', it is clear that even factories turning out similar pieces of war equipment were marked by regional pre-war histories and post-war expectations.

Low skill and pay: female work

The proportion of women in engineering and allied industries had risen from 18 per cent in June 1939 to 39 per cent by December 1943, but unskilled or semi-skilled labour predominated, with a very small proportion of workers reaching the ranks of the

highly-skilled. The mass production of small aircraft parts, for example, might involve only half an hour's training to run machines used for stamping and drilling holes in aluminium pieces. Each drilling might take less than ten seconds to complete.⁽⁹⁾ Shell-filling in munitions factories was notoriously monotonous. Government training centres for teaching skills did exist, but the largest employers of married women on work new to them were munitions and engineering industries, where most of the work was simple and repetitious (and sometimes heavy, noisy, and dirty as well). Its temporary nature was underlined by the slight training and low pay, and by the practices of dilution already established pre-war but intensified during the war. Under the 1940 Extended Employment of Women agreement between the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) and employers, for instance, women, defined as 'temporarily employed', could only get the men's basic rate after 32 weeks of doing the job without assistance. Only those qualified for the work went straight onto the men's wage. Those who needed supervision received 75 per cent of the male rate for the job.⁽¹⁰⁾ This agreement, which proved troublesome to operate, did guarantee women parity in the uncommon event of their being qualified to take up a 'male' job straight off. From the point of view of the engineering unions, it safeguarded the skilled male rate by underlining the temporary extent and terms of women's employment. It was this atmosphere of 'for the duration' which hung over women's work in general and over the employment of married women with children in industry in particular (the spirit of the nursery provisions accorded with this too).

The under-use of potentially skilled woman-power gave rise to much grumbling which intensified as women who had been in effect drafted into industry entered factories. Accusations of inefficiency, and misdirection by local Labour Exchange officials, abounded at the start of the war, and 'hanging around' once you got into your factory was frequently complained of. Married women, especially those with a history of factory work, were on the other hand often represented as docile employees unbothered by repetitive tasks, the details of factory organisation, or the best use of their labour. These women were held to accept, and accept willingly, the traditional position of economic and prestige inferiority. Their employment was given a personal meaning: making technology to get through the war quickly, to safeguard the lives of sons and husbands: if you could see a point in your work, you could put up with it. Mass-Observation quotes a conversation in a British restaurant queue:

- F40B How do you like it?
- F30B Well, it's monotonous, but you think *what it's for*, you know.
- F40B That's right; it makes all the difference, doesn't it, if you think what it's for?¹¹⁾

Most complaints about the under-use of women's abilities are concerned with production efficiency and the lack of it from a managerial point of view: women were under-trained and so were not able to replace men, to the detriment of the war effort. The Ministry of Labour itself found it necessary as late as 1943 to issue a pamphlet, *Women in Shipbuilding*, aimed at employers. This was intended to stretch the imagination of the latter for there was not only an under-use of potentially skilled female labour, but a lack of vision about its possible scope. Even, wrote the Ministry, in the fourth year of the war when all labour-power was needed, women were too often under-employed as unskilled assistants and yard cleaners when with a little encouragement and training they might replace skilled craftsmen. Former housewives

ought not to be underrated, although 'apt to underrate' their own capacity for acquiring skills themselves.

It is no exaggeration to say that the average woman takes to welding as readily as she takes to knitting, once she has overcome any initial nervousness due to the sparks. Indeed, the two occupations have much in common, since they both require a small, fairly complex manipulative movement which is repeated many times, combined with a kind of subconscious concentration at which women excel... Electrical work generally, and wiring in particular, has a special appeal for women and their natural conscientiousness combined with their love of making a neat job makes them ideal 'wiremen'. Few women who have had a home of their own can have resisted the temptation to use a paint pot and a brush and they take with enthusiasm to paint work in the shipyard... A healthy, and not too heavy, sensible woman who has to run a home is marvellously adaptable, and will turn her hand to anything with good will, once she has made up her mind to do it. She has more balance than the young ones...⁽¹²⁾

This text is interestingly and not untypically stuck between a kind of naturalism and an undercutting of that naturalism; it vacillates between asserting the natural aptitude and neatness of women and stretching away into remarks of a try-them-and-be-surprised kind. Thus, it continues, if women are trained with the closer co-operation of the industry, there is no reason why they should not do skilled work on the ships and in the workshops: government Training Centres could be used to turn out more skilled centre lathe turners, for example.

One photograph of two women is nicely captioned 'Working on a Warship, they are Welding the Superstructure'. Another photograph of a driller and his woman helper adds: 'This is the right type of woman for work aboard ship. She gives her mind to the job and vanity does not prevent her wearing sensible boots'. Women painting 'seemed indifferent to such trifles as getting paint in their hair'. Labour relations between the sexes, the pamphlet advises, could be eased by the appointment of women supervisors in large yards to supplement the foreman:

they are admirable channels for settling the grievances and misfits that the men in charge find so difficult to cope with... Such difficulties as do arise do so chiefly because men are not used to dealing with women, so it is suggested that the first prerequisite is the appointment of an experienced woman Labour Officer or Welfare Superintendent.

What is striking about this Ministry of Labour Offering, apart from all the raw material it provides for arguments about whether this use of language is sexist or not – and my sense of it is that an analysis based on 'sexism' here would be wrong because it would collapse far too much together – is the late date of its appearance. Debates about skill, training, and factory and ministerial inefficiencies in the best use of female labour flourished right through the war, even at the 1943 high point, numerically speaking, of women's employment. (And alongside the copious literature of congratulations, too, which we inherit in the shape of tributes to the resourcefulness and daring of somewhat glamourised Land Army girls, firewomen, and the like.)

Length of the working day: strains

The length of the working day caused some commentators to wonder whether the findings of industrial psychology on the counter-productive effect of long hours were unknown to management.⁽¹³⁾ A munitions factory, for instance, might work between a 65 and an 80 hour week; 10 or 12 hour working days were not uncommon, with an hour off for lunch and then often no break after that until six in the evening. A six-day working week was usual; in some factories arrangements were made for women to get off at noon on Saturdays before the shops shut for the weekend. A normal part-time working week would consist of about 30 hours in war industries, but opportunities for part-time work were limited, despite its obvious popularity among women workers. It was neither planned nor uniformly available.⁽¹⁴⁾ Nor, in short, was much else which might have eased the employment of women with children. Arbitrariness, confusions, lack of parity between factories, no dove-tailing of factory shifts and nursery hours, no shopping provisions, and transport difficulties marked the lives of women workers. All this, despite the fact that the large-scale employment of married women had been anticipated from 1939 on.

She starts on the washing-up, but even with me helping it is not nearly half-done before she has to rush back to the factory. She says; 'it's no good, I can't keep up with it. I thought I'd like to do a bit and bring in some more money, but I can't keep up with it. If I could just have a couple of days to get straight, then it would be alright, you could keep it under, but I can't manage like this!'⁽¹⁵⁾

This is from a Mass Observation report on an unskilled 50 year old. The women interviewed by Thomas in 1943 all said that what was hardest was not the tedium of work itself, but the strain of 'managing' at home. Many women did take time off to 'get straight'; the figures for female absenteeism were consistently higher than those for men; two to two-and-a-half times as high overall. But again this generality hides great factory-to-factory differences, and, less significantly, a lack of uniformity in the assessing of absences. At worst (and one indication of 'worst' is the Ministry of Supply Filling Factory which had nearly a quarter of its women workers off at any one point) what led to this was a complex of bad travel arrangements, long distances, poor 'labour relations', no nursery provisions or far-off ones, bad canteen facilities, no shopping hours. It was only reluctantly that management, taken aback by the fact that the majority of women would give 'family reasons' for their frequent absences, had to concede something to the demands of women's domestic responsibilities.

There is a huge literature on female absenteeism in the war which suggests adaptations to ease, or at least to render physically possible, the lives of women workers who might well be faced with two to three hour journeys off to munitions works on top of getting older children to school.⁽¹⁶⁾ A 10 or 12 hour working day could mean leaving the house at five or six before daybreak in the winter, and coming back at 10 or 11 at night, with the housework still to do. This rush for time was institutionalised enough to make good advertising copy: thus in *Picture Post* there appeared a woman at her sink with a Rinsol packet: 'Me boil clothes? Not likely! I've got to be at the Factory by two!' Under pressure of absenteeism, managements fitted work shifts with nursery hours; gave half-an-hour off a week for shopping; used priority shopping passes; organised women to collect lists from other workers and do the shopping for them; or let their workers off at midday Saturday. Two factories

visited by Mass-Observation took literally cosmetic measures to cut down their absentee rates; they 'issued a weekly ration of cigarettes and cosmetics to every female member of the staff, and did it on a Saturday, their worst absentee day normally'. The success of this is not recorded.⁽¹⁷⁾

Part-time work, which was constantly recommended by investigators, factory welfare officers, Medical Officers of Health, industrial psychologists, was rare. It was as if management, whether Ministry of Supply or private industrialists, had been taken by surprise by an outlandish new work force with incomprehensible needs. For despite governmental flourishes about the importance of workers' welfare, and innovations like the 1940 and 1943 Canteens Orders, the provision of British Restaurants, and the gradual introduction of women factory welfare officers, the absolutely predictable problems for women in trying to combine long hours with responsibility for children and homes were not foreseen, and not met. The results further underlined the implausibility of women with children as real workers. An apparently intractable labour force (allowing for that 'greater steadiness' of older married women) was working at a low-skill level 'for the duration' only. It had the status of a temporary nuisance requiring piecemeal 'adaptations' as a response. It could be asked whether the continuously high levels of women's absenteeism are best analysed as a form of militancy, a form of industrial resistance less sharply visible than women's periodic involvements in official or more often unofficial strikes.⁽¹⁸⁾ Or whether, if this kind of resistance cannot be taken as a guarantee of political consciousness (as distinct from boredom or exhaustion with two jobs, work at home and work at work) how that usefully modifies the idea of class-consciousness itself.

Unionisation and pay

The unionisation of women in industry shot up during the war, while some unions like the AEU and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) admitted women for the first time in the course of it. The estimates of the Royal Commission on Equal Pay in 1946 was that the peak point of unionisation and female employment in 1943 had seen some 23 per cent of employed women unionised.⁽¹⁹⁾ This was an advance on the position at the start of the war, when only about five or six per cent of women in industry belonged to any union. Women's low level of unionisation was popularly attributed to an essentially feminine lack of interest in the unions or their concerns:

Women in general are much less critical; they demand industrial change less than men. They take a much lower degree of interest in subjects like nationalisation, co-operation and supply organisation.⁽²⁰⁾

On the other hand, women, particularly unskilled women, were taken to be especially concerned with 'personal' or 'local' issues: local labour arrangements; unsuitable jobs; tyranny by supervisors, etc. My point here is not the objective truth or untruth of these sets of attributed characteristics, or the question of what lies behind them – but to indicate a further instance of the characterising of the women worker as female, as difficult to unionise for reasons to do with gender understood as innate temperament, as essential difference. And the most strikingly different women workers were the mothers.

Given the poor working conditions and the extreme difficulties of combining paid with domestic work, how important was the money as an incentive? At July 1941, the

Ministry of Labour census of earnings of wage-earners gave average wages as 99s 3d for men, 40s 7d for youths and boys, for adult women, 44s 4d, for girls, 25s 2d. In a war factory, women working long hours might earn an average of 66s in 1941.⁽²¹⁾ Thus, while the strong wage-differential between men and women was in general maintained, women's earnings weren't bad, on the face of it. But these earnings were largely based on increased overtime rather than any significant movement in basic wage rates. The rise in the cost of living, plus transport costs and nursery fees, could mean that paid industrial work did not bring in much extra real income. Nonetheless, the extra money was important for servicemen's wives in particular. Their allowances stood at about unemployment benefit rates of the 1930s; 17s 0d from the State, 7s 0d from the husband, with 5s 0d for the first child and less for any others. The soldier's wives in the 1944 Thomas survey stressed their need for extra money, whereas other low and middle wage-earners in his group gave roughly equal emphasis to money and a desire for company as their reason for working. The earliest mention of any women's economic discomfort due to war which *Picture Post* printed, in fact, was a report in 1941 on the Women's War Emergency Committee; a deputation, including Sylvia Pankhurst, was photographed lobbying for better allowances for dependents with the caption 'A Plea for the Mothers'. Later on, in 1944, *Picture Post* published a letter 'from a Wartime Mother':

As a soldier's wife I find it virtually impossible to live on my allowance; as soon as the baby is old enough to be left in the nursery (if I can find one) I shall go back to work to supplement the family income . . . one of my best friends told me I had deteriorated mentally since I became a mother . . . nearly all the men are abroad and out of touch with home affairs and all the women are busy looking after babies (yes, in spite of the falling birthrate) in factories, or in the Services.⁽²²⁾

The acknowledged hardship of service wives, widows with children, and unmarried mothers, who could only pull up their earnings by long hours, led to frequent assertions that the apparently good industrial wage rates were illusory. The Labour Research Department in early 1942, for instance, commented that 'Employers want to keep women's labour cheap, so that it will act as a brake on the men's wage standards after the war.' Most women were entering war industry at the low 'women's rate' and women continued to get on average half or less than half of the male wage.⁽²³⁾ The significance of the women's industrial wage's edge over the average women's rate depended on whether or not it had to be used to support dependents; with the village factory mentioned earlier, for example, it was claimed that so much money for 'girls' work had never been seen locally before. (A painful point raised in areas of high unemployment in South Wales was that miners were out of work while their daughters earned.)⁽²⁴⁾ A women who needed to work to keep herself and her family could manage to do so by entering munitions works where such work was locally available, but only at the cost of long hours.

CLOSING THE WAR NURSERIES

If the labour of even women with young children was required, then some form of official childcare was necessary. This obvious need launched a crisis of official

responses: the history of the war nurseries reveals prolonged hesitations and buck-passing among Ministerial departments, between private industry and 'the State' and, most critically, between local and central government.⁽²⁵⁾

The nurseries were, the government repeatedly emphasised, aids to war production and not social services in themselves, despite the interdepartmental wranglings as to whether they were the province of 'health' or 'education'. Nurseries were not to be understood as pointers to postwar policy, and their status as factory adjuncts was to be maintained in their public presentation. The Ministry of Health commented: 'It is important in any reference in the National papers to make it clear that the urgency and extensive scale of this work is localised and not in the country as a whole'.⁽²⁶⁾ One civil servant, exasperated by delegates of professional nursery enthusiasts, hoped that temporariness could be made clear by a special name for childcare facilities, nursery 'centres'. 'The very fact that a Nursery Centre is neither a nursery school nor a day nursery would stamp them as a purely temporary expedient to deal with war conditions and would make it easier to get rid of them after the war'.⁽²⁷⁾ But the involvement of the Ministry of Health with the provision of nurseries militated against these ends. The Ministry was obliged to sell nurseries as educationally and physically good for young children – in its correspondence, for example, with concerned paediatricians, or against the opposition of the Medical Women's Federation.⁽²⁸⁾ And when it came to justifying the shutting-down of the war nurseries, the Ministry of Health was unable to argue that children had been harmed by them. Although it had made an irresolute attempt to suggest that under-two year olds needed to be at home with their mothers, this was never the main ground for defending the closings. Instead it set great store by what it presented as apathy on the part of working mothers; women were withdrawing their children from the nurseries, hence no 'real demand' existed – just as no 'real demand' had existed at the start of the war.⁽²⁹⁾ It overlooked the fact that nurseries, closely associated with particular industries, were emptying as those industries vanished and the possibility of being a 'war worker' with them.

The speed with which the war nurseries were being closed in 1945 without, it was argued, enough time being given to the local authorities to take over, drew attention to the good faith of the Ministry. The latter twice fended off parliamentary questions about the closings from pro-nursery MPs by reiterating the temporary nature of the nurseries.⁽³⁰⁾ To a question as to whether the Minister was aware that his decision had caused 'deep disappointment to many working-class mothers' and had evoked protests from a number of local authorities, the Ministerial reply was that nurseries had been set up 'as a war service under emergency powers, and these powers cannot be used to provide a normal welfare service'. In similar spirit, Florence Horsburgh, then Parliamentary Under-Secretary, spoke for the Ministry of Health in Parliament. Nurseries, she claimed, were under-used and evidence of demand was dubious – petitions purporting to be from concerned mothers were not all signed by genuine nursery users. While the Labour member for Aberavon described 'a keen and lively demand' from miner's wives that the nurseries there should stay, Miss Horsburgh stated that 'no local authority which had asked to keep a nursery open has been turned down'. The Ministry of Health had, from the inception of the nurseries scheme, intended to keep it firmly as a wartime service, and was not prepared to tolerate appeals for its continuation postwar. Agitation from many quarters, including from those professionally concerned as nursery workers and educationalists, went by the board. The many traces of determination to have nurseries kept and extended postwar – from organisations like the London Women's Parliament National Nursery

Campaign⁽³¹⁾ and in the comments of the *Co-operative Review*, the Socialist Medical Association, the Women Citizen's Association, Public Health Committees like Coventry's – got nowhere. The authenticity of 'demand' could always be queried by a Ministry committed in advance to ignoring it.

The Ministry of Health's behaviour in running counter to what was, in 1945, a broad governmental commitment to the principle of having nursery education after the war did a lot to confuse the issue. In addition, it was widely known that women workers would be wanted postwar, so that the Ministry's actions simply seemed at odds with national need as well as policy. Questions were raised at a Parliamentary level too: Edith Summerskill asked in the Commons in 1945, 'in view of the fact that the Ministry of Labour had indicated that as many women as possible would be needed after the war', how could there not be nursery provision, in the end?⁽³²⁾ This expectation of the inevitability of a coherent plan for the care of children of wage-earning mothers weakened the force of protest on many levels against the war nurseries' demise. For the appropriate objects of protest seemed to be the confusion and contradictory behaviour of governmental departments, rather than any first principles about nursery education and women working.

After 1945, the Exchequer's grant to the local authorities was halved, requisitioned buildings returned to their peacetime uses, and the responsibility for running the nurseries now settled on the local authorities. This was a very significant change; because the shift from the central governmental control to local control threw the whole matter open to the idiosyncracies of the regions. Some Medical Officers of Health, for instance, were opposed to nurseries on principle, whereas others were actively sympathetic; some authorities had no prewar local traditions of women's employment. The halving of the Treasury grant meant that nursery costs would now have to be met out of the rates, and compete for part of the local block grant with other health and welfare services. By the end of 1947 there were 879 day nurseries being maintained by local authorities – a drop of almost 700 compared with the wartime peak.⁽³³⁾ The Ministry of Health, as the internal memoranda of its civil servants make clear, was perfectly aware of the likely outcome of the central to local transfer of responsibility. The 1944 Education Act's wording did not, as the Ministry noted, make the provision of nurseries unambiguously statutory.⁽³⁴⁾ The Ministry, at odds with governmental policy as a whole, correctly anticipated that nurseries, once re-categorised as 'welfare' and charged to the rates, would get little sympathy from most local authorities.

If the programme of the new Labour government of 1945 was to be taken seriously at all, then it followed that the question was not whether nurseries would stay – but in what form and how efficiently they would be established as a permanent social service. This commitment then, took the bite out of the opposition to the end of the wartime nurseries, which were heavily marked by that very tag of 'wartime'. As with the employment of married women, the spirit of 'for the duration' returned. It was possible for it to return in the teeth of contrary expectations (that women would still be needed as industrial workers, that nurseries were part of fresh social policies) precisely because the splits in the government departments responsible fitted into an overall failure of seriousness in policy. Given the bottom-of-the-barrel nature of the employment of mothers, there was no pressure on succeeding governments, whether Coalition or Labour, to think through all the State-family suppositions which their policies embodied.

*Lorna is an ex-Service girl
who finds her career in laundrycraft*

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Picture Post, April 6, 1946

THE POSTWAR PRODUCTION DRIVE FOR WOMEN'S LABOUR

Women's withdrawal from the labour force was a gradual process and began well before the formal end of the war. Married women had been placed in a priority category for release. By 1945, engineering and munitions dropped many women as the need of war-industries for intensive labour fell away. Nonetheless, while labour controls were being lifted, urgent appeals were made to women to remain in or enter employment.

Sir Stafford Cripps, speaking in 1943 as Minister for Aircraft Production, to the National Conference of Women called by the Government, voiced the hope that once again women workers would be willing to shift their jobs; war work was folding, but, he said, there would be 'a vast expansion in civilian production which will absorb large quantities of women workers'.⁽³⁵⁾ And, addressing the British Federation of Professional and Business Women in 1943, he reiterated the expectation that women workers would be increasingly needed after the war. His speech is a model text of progressive invocation of the sexless 'citizen':

I have already stated that there are still problems to be solved with regard to our own country, especially on the economic side and I think that the key to the solutions of these problems is that people of both sexes should be regarded as citizens rather than as male or female citizens. The incidents of life will always make a difference between the sexes, but this relates primarily to the young mother and should not persist throughout adult life and certainly should not lead to any general discrimination. The experience of war has once again enabled us to see and

experience the true equality between men and women, and the comradeship which has been demonstrated both in our factories and in our services should eliminate that suspicion of economic rivalry between the sexes which made the results of the last war so disappointing . . . the theoretical problem of sex equality has gone, we now face the practical problem, and its only solution is to avoid inter-sex economic competition by making the field wide enough for all to enjoy . . .⁽³⁶⁾

The 1947 production drive, however, had no such pretensions to undifferentiated sexual democracy. The Ministry of Labour had in mind a limited campaign, aimed at increasing British exports, which would require the labour of women, mostly in the textile factories, but also in agriculture. Its *Gazette* in June 1947 specified where women were most wanted: in cotton, in wool and worsted, in clothing industries, hospital domestic services, laundries, in the Land Army, iron and steel, boots and shoes, and transport. An address to women workers by Bevan emphasised that women were not being asked to do men's jobs: that the labour shortage was temporary; that part-time work would be made available; that 'he (Bevan) was not appealing to women with very young children although for those who wanted to volunteer and who had children a little older, there were in many places day nurseries and creches'. Film trailers, cinema slides, shop window displays and special recruiting centres were introduced in 69 designated districts of female labour shortage. There were 300,000 outstanding vacancies in the summer of 1947 for women workers, but the Ministry of Labour envisaged the potential employment of three times that number, during the pressure on production.⁽³⁷⁾ Geoffrey Thomas' second survey for the Ministry of Labour (conducted in 1947, published in 1948) calculated that if nurseries and enough part-time work were offered, some 900,000 women might be persuaded to return to or enter industry.⁽³⁸⁾ Towards the end of 1947, the Ministry of Labour estimated that an extra 22,000 women had responded to the appeal and that the true figure might turn out to be 'considerably higher': by January 1948 they had calculated that the working population of women was some 70,000 larger. The number of women (in November 1947) was 17 per cent greater than before the war. The proportion of women in civilian employment thus increased from 27 per cent in 1939 to 30 per cent in November 1947: it was 30 per cent in mid-1945.⁽³⁹⁾

It was in just these areas of traditional employment that, from the outlook of 1945, conditions were unenticing. Pay was low and the canteen and childcare provisions were non-existent or vanishing. Consumer and export industries had lost many workers to the war factories, and when the latter closed, as G.D.H. Cole wrote:

there was nationally a widespread reluctance to return to the old conditions of low pay and lack of amenities in squalid and obsolete factories.⁽⁴⁰⁾

The Lancashire cotton industry, for example, found itself in trouble; its low paid women workers had been swept into munitions during the war. But:

Experience of these factories made many people reluctant to return, or to send their children, to the textile mills. This attitude was reinforced by the bad repute into which employment in the cotton industry had fallen because of the high rate of unemployment that had prevailed in it year after year. In these circumstances, it was evident that the industry would not get or hold the labor it needed without a substantial improvement in wages even though its output were to fall a long way short of what it had been in the bad times before 1939.⁽⁴¹⁾

The jute industry, too, based in Dundee, suffered a labour shortage: a lack of raw jute to process, caused by new Indian export controls, coincided with a lack of women workers. In 1946 the number of women in jute work was half what it had been before the war and one third of what it had been in 1931. The town was the object of a New Industries plan: an article in the *New Statesman* entitled 'Gynopolis' in 1946 reported:

A jute employer, now looking for women's labour, said that women had been 'spoiled' in wartime industry with 'Workers' Playtime' and 'that sort of rubbish'. Another assured me that, if only there were more consumer goods to buy, the women 'would come tumbling back'. But a public official, whose job it is to know, said 'Don't you believe it. Women who have got out of jute won't go back to it unless their families are going hungry again: and Dundee is balancing its new industries to see that won't happen.'

The same writer mentioned local anxieties about the likelihood of women electing to work even in better conditions, once a 'family wage' met their needs; the future workforce planning might suffer, too, sabotaged by women controlling their fertility:

Give the men a decent pay-packet which 'a gill on the road home' won't hurt: give the women a decent home and the chance to bring up a family, and will there be those 29,000 workers for Dundee's Five-Year Plan? It is very doubtful. And if there is, another factor will come in – the birthrate and its long-term effect on the new industries. The number of juveniles entering Dundee industry this year is a third less than ten years ago, because, as a public official said, 'factory workers made a deliberate choice of labour'.⁽⁴²⁾

Yet in other areas where industry made no demands for female labour, women in search of employment met with very different comments on their gender and their hopes of work. Wales was not included in the 1947 production drive's targets at all. A married woman, refused at job interviews because of her marital status, wrote in 1947:

There is no tradition of female labour in South Wales, and especially now that there are ex-servicemen without employment, the prejudices against retaining married women in occupations is very strong. Scarcely a week passes without some indignant ratepayer writing to the postbag about pin-money women, and appealing for the dismissal of married women workers so that ex-servicemen may have their jobs, 'and thus become satisfied citizens'.⁽⁴³⁾

WOMEN'S LABOUR ORGANISATIONS AND THE DEMAND FOR NURSERIES

The 1947 production drive for the increased labour of married women in certain industries did not, in the end, have the effect of meeting women's needs for childcare provisions. The wartime principle of 'for the duration only', government and ministerial equivocations and local authority abnegation of responsibility all combined to deny wage-earning mothers' actual needs. And the ways in which these needs were formulated by the women's unions changed over the immediate postwar years, away from an emphasis on the need for community-based nurseries, to a justification

of nurseries in terms of the requirements of specific industries for specific labour. The real exigencies of economic and political change between 1945 and the early 1950s entered into the expressions of union hopes, narrowing them. Shifts in the political history of the union-based women's organisations show the difficulties of assuming a close association between industrial and human needs.

The war and postwar conferences, for instance, of the Representatives of Unions Catering for Women Workers paid great attention to the need for full nursery provision to enable married women workers to stay in industry after the war. At the same time, their value as a community service which should be broadly available was insisted upon. In 1946 several speakers, including delegates from trades councils in Manchester and Salford, and Birmingham, attacked the transfer of responsibility for nursery financing away from central government to local government because this was resulting in local authorities claiming that they could not afford the cost of running them.⁽⁴⁶⁾ The next year the same conference agreed resolutions put forward by Miss Ault (Tobacco Workers) and Miss Chipchase (Railway Clerks) demanding the maintaining and increasing of day nurseries, which should 'be open for everybody's use'. Miss Chipchase commented that housewives were also entitled to have some mental relief while they were doing their job, as their occupation was 'just as much a job' as if they were working in a factory, shop, or office.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Speakers at the 1948 conference of Representatives of Unions Catering for Women Workers were less interested in metaphors of the housewife as worker and more concerned with the postwar recruitment drive: if the government wished to recruit more married women to industry, then it must make it possible for local authorities to provide nurseries, by restoring the 100 per cent grant it had allowed them during the war. What in practice was happening, though, was the opening of workplace nurseries in the wool and cotton districts: union delegates were anxious about the registration and inspection of these to ensure that they came up to local authority standards. One speaker was confident that the needs of production would bring about adequate childcare facilities: 'The Lancashire cotton industry was so dependent on women that the battle of the "balance of payments" was largely in their hands'.⁽⁴⁵⁾

The 1949 conference continued these hopes that the demands of the economy could be a springboard for the industrial emancipation of women:

Conference, being convinced that the operation of a full socialist programme was dependent upon the mobilisation of every available pair of hands in industry, placed on record the view that the adoption of the principle of the 'Rate for the Job' would go a long way towards encouraging many women to return to industry.⁽⁴⁶⁾

But the demands of production were at the same time causing a contraction in the general spread of childcare provisions: the 1949 Conference was informed that

The building of new nursery schools could only be sanctioned where the Minister of Education was satisfied, after consultation with the Minister of Labour, that such work was required to assist the employment of married women in industry.⁽⁴⁷⁾

By 1950, this restriction of nurseries to adjuncts of production, not social means of responding to the needs of mothers and children, marked a complete break with the sentiments of 1945-6. The TUC General Council's support for nurseries became

limited to 'areas where a case for them has been made out'.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Throughout 1948 and 1949 more mill and factory nurseries opened in Lancashire and the East and West Ridings. In the early 1950s these employer-controlled provisions drew (deservedly or undeservedly) much criticism, including attacks on women industrial workers as heartless child-dumpers.

Picture Post demonstrates this change: it radically reversed its campaigning for more and better nurseries as part of a postwar new deal 'for the ordinary family.' in 1956 it ran a feature on 'Children of Women who Work'; the women were mill-workers, the children described as miserable in their factory nursery for long hours where, it said, the only glimpse of colour was provided by the oranges in the green-grocer's over the road. The mothers were emotionally destroying their children for the sake of luxuries. 'Is it *really* necessary in this Welfare State for a woman to go out to work, or do they do it for the ice cream and the TV?'⁽⁴⁹⁾ Women who went out to work became shameful. The possibilities of shorter hours, of improvements in nurseries, were no longer mentionable.

Some women's organisations were better placed than the 'female' unions to avoid the restricting of discussion about childcare to the fluctuating demands of industry. The Women's Co-Operative Guild annual congresses had passed resolutions in favour of nursery schools throughout the 1930s, on grounds which included their capacity to 'avert anxiety' to mothers living in bad housing conditions. In the 1940s they agitated for more war nurseries. In 1937 some branches had proposed a campaign 'of practical politics':

the value of motherhood in national life should receive recognition in the form of a State scheme for the endowment of Motherhood and Family Allowances, such scheme to provide for pensions to Married Mothers at 55 years of age for services rendered.⁽⁵⁰⁾

This concern with the practical recognition of maternal need, which continued to be voiced by the Guild through the war years, spoke about women at home and the place of better local services. The 1946 annual conference demanded the provision of more maternity homes, 'fees to be within the reach of all working-class people', more maternity and child welfare clinics, a National Maternity Service, and:

the continued maintenance of war-time nurseries until such time as it is possible to provide Nursery Schools adequate to the needs of the people.⁽⁵¹⁾

'The needs of the people' were, in the aspirations of the Women's Co-operative Guild at this period, to be met through the universal provision of adequate local authority facilities: needs were seen, roughly speaking, as social and general, 'community-based' rather than tied into the demands of industry. Although the very generality of this understanding of the nature of maternal needs led to a risk of blurring it with the expressions of pronatalism about the general figure of 'the mother', it did avoid another danger: arguing for maternal need and the needs of production in the same breath.

That the postwar recruitment drive for women workers sought out not female labour-power in general, but only certain kinds in particular geographically-restricted industries, did not work towards any all-round increase of childcare. On the contrary, it made the association of nurseries with limited employment all the more rigorous.

The 1947 production drive re-emphasised the spirit of the war nurseries: childcare while and where women's labour was needed. The basing of postwar nurseries increasingly in mills and factories underlined the instrumental nature of their existence. No broadly-emancipating moves in the direction of a social recognition of childcare needs accompanied the cries for female labour. Nurseries, the business more and more of individual employers, were increasingly tied in with the fluctuating needs of those employers, and less and less to any conception of 'social need'. The latter category had anyway been captured, in the immediate postwar years, by a rhetoric which spoke, depending on its political persuasion, of the needs of either the nation or of the community for more children.

THE DESIRES AND INTENTIONS OF POSTWAR WORKING WOMEN; ATTRIBUTIONS AND INVESTIGATIONS

The question of what fight was put up by women themselves, unionised or not, to keep the nurseries open is one on which there's a scarcity of evidence, other than impressions from newspaper and journal reports. This is one of the many points on which the women workers who lived through the period could be consulted. Not enough is known about who precisely used the nurseries. It's difficult, too, to get a detailed sense of the reactions of women to having their children suddenly in State nurseries: people can still be asked, and the information from surveys can be sharpened. The fact that 'mothers' are no more uniform a class than are 'working women' is obvious enough. Yet everything conspires, because of the thinness of detail about regional differences, the relative novelty of work for different groups, and pre-war labour histories, to make a block treatment of 'the working mother' a temptation, and so make close analysis an impossibility.

At the end of the war, it was clear that forms of female employment would alter. But what did 'women themselves' want to do? This exercised the imaginations of any observers and political groupings who looked beyond the celebrations of women as heroic contributors to the war effort. Various parties seized the chance to speak for an artificially-unified constituency of 'women', whose apparent silences and hesitations they eagerly claimed to fill in.⁽⁵²⁾

The Communist Party, for instance, took up the question of women's postwar work in a 1945 leaflet entitled *Woman's Place?* A photograph of a filler in a shell factory is captioned, 'What kind of work for her after the war?' and of a landgirl, 'Will she want to continue on the land?'. Of a shipyard worker, 'Perhaps a typist before the war, now an expert welder. Will she want to return to the desk?' The Communist Party was optimistic about the advent of a new socialist morality:

The country's ideas have had a good shake-up. 'A man's job' and 'woman's place' haven't the same meaning as before. Men and women are becoming comrades.

This comradeliness, manifested in part by male workers helping to unionise their sisters, was a theme to which the Party had committed itself in the course of the war. In 1943 it had published a series of leaflets to this end. *I am Proud and Happy* by a 'Woman War Worker' explained how you could do factory work and be a mother too with enough planning: 'and so, you see, my 4 children, a part-time job and my political work can be crammed into 16 hours a day'. Other leaflets recommended that women at

work should keep a close eye on health standards especially: 'Food, cleanliness, common-sense; who should know better how to tackle these problems than the good housewife turned factory worker?' The involvement of women in union work is, typically, cheered on in *A Soldier writes to his Wife*:

Freda, do you remember how you used to get mad if I stayed out late at a Union branch meeting or had a drink or so with some of the lads afterwards to talk over Union business? None of that spirit now. You women have seen pretty quickly how much a strong Union can mean to production . . . Derek and Joan must be proud of their Shop Steward mother. So am I!

In 1945, the theme of comradely co-operation at work was reiterated in Party leaflets. In *Woman's Place*, a chief woman shop steward at a Durham steel works was quoted: 'the men shop stewards gave us every help . . . I will certainly take part in the shaping of the new world after the war. Thousands of other women feel the same as I do'. The introduction of equal pay at once, said the leaflet,

would have a tonic effect on women workers. It would be as if the government were to say, 'Well, girls, you've been at it for over four years. You've shown your ability. So now we're going to give you a tonic – the rate for the job . . .' It will help to make sure that there is no question of cutting the rate for the men when they return from the Forces. And it will establish the status of women.

The Labour Party's main policy declaration for the 1945 election, *Let Us Face the Future*, did not make any specific mention of the postwar employment prospects for women workers, but referred to the virtually-universal conviction that the birthrate was dangerously low. 'A healthy family life must be fully ensured and parenthood must not be penalised if the population of Britain is to be prevented from dwindling'.

The Conservative Party, too, issued a special pamphlet in 1946 called *Women and the Peace* which like the Communist Party leaflets relied on 'the personal touch'. It followed the work and housework prospects of four women, with the message that each could achieve her individual wants if 'State regimentation' were resisted. Charting population trends, it pointed to what it took to be the necessity for women to have more children; child allowance, then on the point of being introduced by the government, should be paid to the mother. Jobs for women were advocated, for 'work makes work' – 'Everyone who can work, must work, either to augment our national income, or to help run our national services'. The Conservative Women's Reform Group pamphlet in 1946 said that the male anxiety about the wider employment of women would 'be groundless in a nation geared for full employment in order to maintain its national income and re-establish its wealth'.

The tenor, then, of the literature of the main political parties was to encourage women as workers. There was not, in the immediate postwar period, any assumption in the programmes of the main parties that a return of women workers *en masse* to the home was either necessary or desirable. But at the same time they often included references to the dangerously low birthrate and the importance of maternity. On the other hand, the impression of many contemporary sociologists and journalists was that married women would leave the labour market in droves of their own accord anyway. For example, the historical biographer Margaret Goldsmith wrote in *Women and the Future*, (1946):

Many women, possibly the majority of married women, have not enjoyed their new independence; they have been made miserable by the wartime interruptions of family life. As a result, many married women, perhaps the majority, fervently wish themselves back into their pre-war home routine. A number of wives to whom I have talked are so homesick for their pre-war way of life that they seem to have created in their imagination a glowing fantasy of what this life was like. All the small yet grinding irritations of domesticity are forgotten.⁽⁵³⁾

Behind this, she speculated, lay 'fatigue' and 'the wish for change' after years of industrial work. Mass-Observation's study of demobilisation *The Journey Home* (1946) also described the majority of married women in war work as hoping and expecting to settle down quickly after the war.

Ellen Wilkinson, the Labour MP for Jarrow, was quoted by Goldsmith as distinguishing the skilled from unskilled workers:

The woman who is finding factory work hard physically longs for that return, but I have not yet found the woman who has interesting and responsible work who wants to give it up just to be wife and mother in a small house.⁽⁵⁴⁾

Caroline Haslett, as President of the Women's Engineering Society, had a special interest in the fate of skilled workers; 'Many of us' she said in 1946,

are hopeful that the nation's industry and economy will be sufficiently strong after the war to permit of many skilled women workers being retained, particularly in view of the reconstruction which will be necessary to repair the destruction of war and the industries which will be re-established. It is to be expected that with a bold planning policy there will be work for all.⁽⁵⁵⁾

In general, then, unskilled women workers were expected to return home gladly, while skilled women's wants modified this impression. Such forecasting, however, rarely paid much attention to the details of working women's lives in terms of wages, conditions of work, or childcare provision. Postwar journalists and sociologists tended to accept the wishes attributed to women to return home as true, and to confirm, or lament this wish, but not to scrutinise the original attribution. Mass-Observation's poll of women workers in *The Journey Home* (1944), is an object lesson in the surface reading of survey responses. It quoted a Gallup Poll which had suggested that three-fifths of women wanted to go on working postwar, but modified it thus with its own survey: 43 per cent of women believed that after the war women should not do men's jobs; 25 per cent thought that they should; 28 per cent, that it depended on post-war circumstances. On the basis of these figures, Mass-Observation concluded that the majority of women would want to return home rather than take away employment from returning men.⁽⁵⁶⁾ But the picture is at once less decisive if the ambiguities of 'depends on postwar circumstances' are taken into account, and if the supposition that those who support a family are always male is questioned. Further questions, in fact, by Mass-Observation did break down the apparent smoothness of the elision between men returning from war and women returning home. Assurances made in 1944 about full employment for all ('with proper planning, there would be room for both men and women') is a typical quotation from Sir Stafford Cripps) looked less convincing as war factories vanished and the means to enable married women to work went with them.

The small survey literature of the postwar period seem less sure which way married women might jump in their desires to work or not. And the assumption was that such desires anyway would be constructed on the basis of pure will, unmuddled by considerations like who would look after the children. Geoffrey Thomas's 1944 survey for the Ministry of Reconstruction, for example, at first sight appears to confirm that women *were* in favour of going home and not competing for men's jobs. In Autumn 1943, 29 per cent of his married women wanted to work fulltime postwar, 36 per cent not at all, and 10 per cent part-time; and while two-thirds of the married women not wanting to go on working gave 'enough to do at home' for their reason for getting out, more of these were childless married women than mothers. Many also felt that 'there would not be jobs when the men came back'. Yet those who specifically believed what Thomas quotes as 'mustn't do a man out of his job in peacetime' were only one per cent of all respondents – illustrating the difference between principle, and pragmatics dictated by expectation.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Women's experience of war work anyway was that it was temporary. We have seen that this experience was not merely subjective, but was written into the spirit as well as the implementation of kinds of work, nursery provisions, and the rest. Women had worked in circumstances which reinforced this air of 'replacing men'. Anxieties about jobs for the returning men were perfectly reasonable in this context – even though in practice most women were not directly ousting men, but working in employment created by the war. Furthermore the marriage bar which remained in many office and white collar occupations through and after the war also emphasised the temporary nature of women's work and their lack of plausibility as serious workers. Nonetheless, Thomas's figures do suggest an apparently greater conservatism among women than considerations of the availability of nursery places or memories of large scale male unemployment would enforce. But it was younger married women without children who were the most eager to leave work and return home, apparently. ('Younger' means under 35). Younger married women thought that women should be at home, unless forced out to work through the need for extra money. Those who in 1943 were keenest on going on working, especially on a part-time basis if they could, were the older married women. What sense can be made of what looks like a more conservative set of attitudes among the younger workers? There is more information in Geoffrey Thomas' second survey conducted for the Ministry of Labour and National Service and published in 1948 as an offshoot of the 1947 production drive.⁽⁵⁸⁾

In July 1947 Thomas estimated that one third of all women between 16 and 60 were in fulltime work and only nine per cent of these were working part-time. Most workers were older married women. The main factors putting off younger women were marriage, children, and economics; 'marriage', concluded Thomas, 'was several times more important than children' as a deterrent to job seeking. Thus nine-tenths of unoccupied women in July 1947 were married; of these, just over half had older and therefore less dependent children aged between 11 and 15 years. Most of them had previously been 'operatives' in manufacturing industries; these were the workers which the postwar production drive wanted back in industry. But Thomas commented

the majority of women thought that women should go out to work only if they can carry out their duties to their homes and families. It is clearly this sentiment, that a women's first duty is to her home, which leads to many women abandoning their work on marriage.

Why the apparent prevalence of this conviction among younger 'lower economic group' women in particular? For both the Thomas surveys make the point that it is marriage as such, and not children, which stops women from working. (For example, in July 1947 only just over one third of childless married women were working; whereas married women with over five year old children worked as frequently as did married women who had no children).

Some 60 per cent of the group of women Thomas interviewed in 1947 had gone straight on working through and after the war. The interlinking of 'sentiment' and material facts – for example, no nurseries – was thought by Thomas himself to be mutually reinforcing:

The real and familiar difficulties women face when they consider taking up work are reinforced by the sentiment that a woman's first duty is to her home and family. Both must be tackled if a recruitment policy is to be successful and one has a direct bearing on the other.⁽⁵⁹⁾

Low wages he suggested, therefore, were in need of improving, and day nurseries should be re-introduced. Three-quarters of Thomas' interviewees wanted part-time work, the opportunities for which he assessed as slight in 1947. He also pointed out that whereas what the Ministry of Labour wanted was more unskilled workers, in fact a large proportion of women in lower income groups were already out working; these, 'the major source of unskilled and semi-skilled labour have been drawn upon to a high degree'. Could clerical workers, he asked, be persuaded into factory work? The opportunities of employment open to women with higher education were already restricted enough; but the disadvantages in taking up factory work were great:

The present level of women's wages is too low to provide a sufficient incentive for many of the women who are not working now to make a special attempt to overcome their difficulties . . . the disadvantages of working outweigh the advantages which it offers at present.⁽⁶⁰⁾

Younger women's lack of interest in waged work, then, was determined by more hard-headed grounds than a purely sentimental conservatism about a woman's proper place after marriage. What had such work – mostly fulltime, with low wages and without childcare provision – to offer, except to the badly off for whom the marginal gain might be critical if they had children to support, or to older women in the habit of outside work who 'missed the company' and who weren't expecting to have any more children, or whose children had grown up?



**I'm
clocking-in
-at home!**

I've said good-bye to that war job, and now I'm going to enjoy the simple home life I've been so eagerly planning. Family health will be my first responsi-

bility. I shall make sure that 'Milk of Magnesia', which has helped to keep me free of digestive upsets in the stress and strain of war, will never be missing from the medicine cabinet.

'MILK OF MAGNESIA'

*Milk of Magnesia' is the trade mark of Phillips' preparation of magnesia.

MARRIAGE, WOMEN AND WORK POSTWAR: EXPECTATIONS AND MOVEMENTS

In 1939, about a third of all women between 20 and 24 in England were already married and war speeded up an established tendency towards an earlier age of marrying. (The discovery that a high proportion of young women were already married and thus out of the reach of wartime Employment Orders came as a surprise to the Ministry of Labour). Not only were more women marrying younger but also children were being born earlier, and childbearing was being concentrated in fewer years. If you had been working in factories through the war, the chance of leaving and having a family must have had strong attractions. If you had been at school during the war years, your outlook at the end of the war in terms of work wasn't enticing; marriage as an alternative 'career' to boredom and low pay in industry would have had its attractions.

One suggestive account of young women's expectations is Pearl Jephcott's *Rising Twenty*, (published in 1947 but based on earlier research) a study of about 100 working class girls between 17 and 21 in 1945. They included girls from a Durham colliery area, from a large Northern manufacturing town, and from central London. Their effective choices of work were shop, office, or factory (tailoring, machining, sweetmaking or light engineering). There was slight prospect of any increase in wages after the age of 21, and not much chance of learning skilled work. Expected to help in their family home, they felt they had little to do but 'mark time' until they could marry. One girl in 1945 recalled her work a few years earlier;

I left my job at the toffee factory (which I got through the Labour) because I got the end of my finger taken off by the machine and then I was suspended through lack of sugar. I used to get 13s 6d at the factory but it was a standing job (no wonder I am skinny)... It is very monotonous.⁽⁶¹⁾

This girl, commented Pearl Jephcott, was

one who would like to begin to raise a family soon and would be prepared to sacrifice her dancing and pictures in order to have children of her own. Her attitude is probably affected by the fact that she sees no prospect of rising in her present job and has no conception of any career apart from marriage.⁽⁶²⁾

These girls, several of whose mothers had worked in munitions, said that they saw little point in their work and would only think about staying on after marriage if their

husband's pay alone was not enough 'to get a good home together'. But Jephcott noted that;

A few of the older girls are definitely proud of the technical skill, for example in welding or blindmaking, that they have acquired, as distinct from the earning power that this had given them . . . others realise that all they have learned by the age of 20 is, perhaps, to use a power machine; and they feel vaguely, that, although the money they take is 'alright', the six years should have taught them something more.⁽⁶³⁾

An indifference to, or disenchantment with, trades unionism accompanied little exposure to it. Experience of wartime work had not helped: one girl in the war had gone to

a tailoring job in another factory where at 17 she was pressing cloth from 8 am to 6 pm with a certain amount of overtime. She found the work tedious, disliked the constant standing and the fact that the room was in partial blackout.⁽⁶⁴⁾

Early engagements had been hurried along by the atmosphere of war and departures overseas. There was always the hopeful determination that your life would be better than your mother's had been, especially if she had tried to combine the care of several children with a factory job during the war. The age group of girls represented in *Rising Twenty* was the target of the Ministry of Labour's postwar production drive for more unskilled women factory workers.

But whatever women's own wants or expectations, and indeed whatever the extent of opinion against married women working and against the 'double wage', or the feeling that a working wife implied her husband's humiliating incapacity to support her, increasing numbers of married women did work postwar. The conventional estimate is that the postwar figures for women's employment agree with projections made from the end of the 1930s about the 'natural' (i.e. non-war-interrupted) general rise. And this included a high proportion of married women.

In December 1945, the number of women workers, including those in the Armed Forces, was over one million higher than in 1939; but by December 1946, it was less than threequarters of a million higher. Exclusive of those in the Armed Forces and Auxiliary Services, the number of women workers was 5,094,000 in 1939 and 5,710,000 in December 1946.⁽⁶⁵⁾

In May 1947, the Ministry of Labour forecast that in the absence of significant changes, by 1951 over half a million women in the 15 to 39 age group would have left industrial jobs and that pre-war patterns of employment would spontaneously re-assert themselves.⁽⁶⁶⁾ But in 1955, Titmuss looked back over the postwar period to observe that between 1946 and May 1955 the number of married women in gainful employment rose to constitute almost half of all women at work: the biggest source of recruitment in recent years had been married women over 30 years of age. At the same time Titmuss commented that the older woman who had got childbearing over would find herself shut out from training and free pensionable occupations;

Motherhood and date of birth disqualify her, while the unthinking and the unknowing may condemn her in moralising terms for seeking work outside the home. Few subjects are more surrounded with prejudice and moral platitudes than

this; an approach which perhaps deepens the conflict for the women themselves about their roles as mothers, wives, and wage-earners.⁽⁶⁷⁾

This increase in the average age of working women had been slowly developing throughout the war. Between, for example, 1943 and 1947, despite the fall in the absolute numbers of all women working their average age increased in that time, and was higher again than it had been in 1939.⁽⁶⁸⁾

Between 1939 and 1957, the number of employed women over the age of 15 rose from approximately six to nearly eight million. By 1948, 6,785,000 women were registered as working: over the next ten years, another 840,000 joined them. These were mostly married women, whose numbers increased both absolutely and relatively to all women workers: at the end of May 1950, 40 per cent of the female workforce was married, some 2,850,000 women: by 1956, the proportion had risen to 50 per cent, 3,720,000 women. The period between 1931 and 1951 also saw broad changes in women's occupations: an extra ¾ million clerks and typists, and a large rise in unskilled labour, including machine-minding. These changes continued between 1948 and 1958, when the Ministry of Labour estimated that, out of the influx of married women,

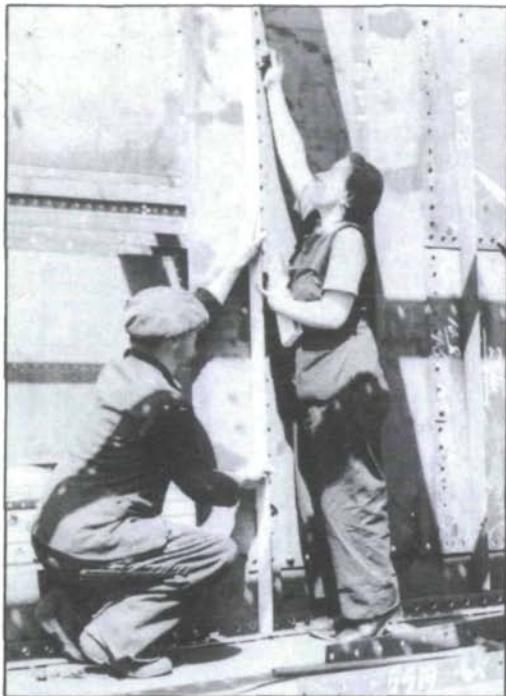
More than a third have gone into distribution, and nearly a third into professional services. The only substantial decreases have been in domestic service, and, in the last three years, in textiles.⁽⁶⁹⁾

Some areas contributed more to the numerical growth of women workers: the largest increases were in the Southern and Eastern regions of England.

Those who did continue to work outside the home immediately after the war, (bringing the numbers up to what was held to be no more than a 'normal' increase on the 1931 census figures) were mostly women with older children, or women who were childless or widowed. But still a good fifth of all of them did have children of school age or younger (under 14) by the start of the 1950s. In his 1943 survey, Thomas had estimated that the highest postwar demand for work would come from women between the ages of 35 and 45, and that especially in the absence of part-time work and nurseries, married women under 35 would be the first to go. This proved to have been a fair prediction. In 1948, he had reckoned that nearly a million women might be willing to take up outside work if wages were improved, and nurseries provided with flexible hours, better shopping arrangements, and more and cheaper laundries. Most of that extra million had, in fact, joined the labour force by the late fifties: but its recruitment was not due to the provision of the social conditions recommended postwar to enable mothers to work; it came about in their absence, and in a climate of increasing hostility to mothers working outside the home at all.



For a short but intensive space, roughly 1941 to 1947, 'freeing mothers', work outside the home, and pro-natalism were all held together in a tight though precarious balance. It is this I want to go on to discuss.

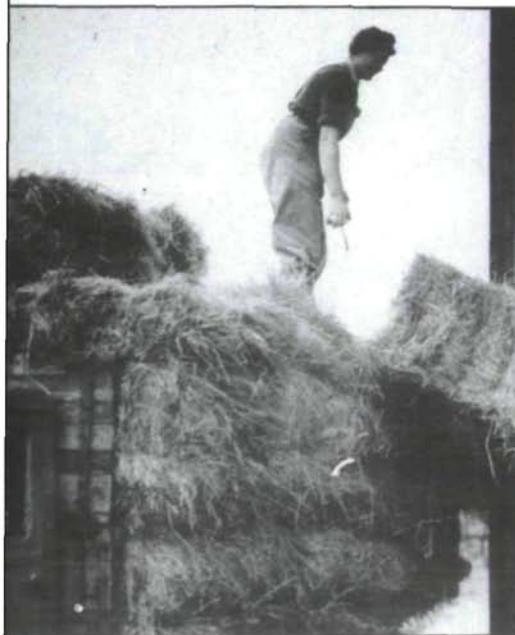
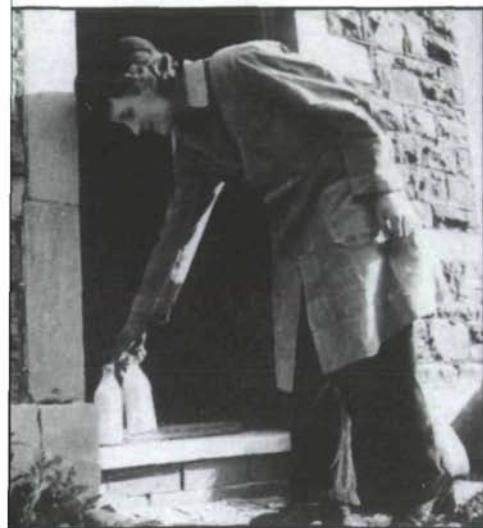


above: British Women helping to build Warships.

Women in wartime take up men's work in the national effort. The following picture illustrates some of the work undertaken by women in the dockyards. The husbands of these women are serving in the forces. Some of the workers at their war jobs painting ships.

below: Women painting

Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum



Part-time women workers. Mrs. A.B. Skinner of Tottendown Bristol, works part-time as a milroundswoman. She took the job two years ago when her husband went overseas. 'The more women that take jobs, the more men can be called up and the sooner the war will be over', says Mrs Skinner.

Ministry of Labour Photos. Women chipping stainless steel billets of a light type.

Landgirl's Day: British farmers are preparing this year for the biggest ever harvest . . . Every extra ounce of food produced at home means more ships freed for their greatest task, the Invasion of Hitler's Europe . . . And young and old with a will to aid this all out drive are the 76,000 members of the Women's Land Army. Typical landgirl is 29-year-old Rosalind Cox . . . Rising at 6.15, Rosalind pedals to work, is hard at work morning to night, tending the giant sun-dryer, stacking hay, sacking barley, boiling potatoes for pig food, assisting in the dairy, '80 pounds each, that is the weight of the bales weighed . . . 'Rosalind jabs a 9" hook into the hay bales, heaves them to the side, slithers them down a bank to hands waiting below to stack them.

Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum

PART II PRONATALISM

POSTWAR PRONATALISM: THE GENERAL SPREAD

George Orwell's essay, *The English People*, was written in May 1944 as a text for a Collins series, *Britain in Pictures*.

The philoprogenitive instinct will probably return when fairly large families are already the rule, but the first steps towards this must be economic ones. Half-hearted family allowances will not do the trick, especially when there is a severe housing shortage, as there is now . . . Any government, by a few strokes of the pen, could make childlessness as unbearable an economic burden as a big family is now: but no government has chosen to do so, because of the ignorant idea that a bigger population means more unemployed. Far more drastically than anyone has proposed hitherto, taxation will have to be graded so as to encourage childbearing and to save women with young children from being obliged to work outside the home. And this involves re-adjustment of rents, better public service in the matter of nursery schools and playing grounds, and the building of bigger and more convenient houses . . . The economic adjustments must come first, but a change of outlook is also needed. In the England of the last thirty years it has seemed all too natural that blocks of flats should refuse tenants with children, that parks and squares should be railed off to keep the children out of them, that abortion, theoretically illegal, should be looked on as a peccadillo, and that the main aim of commercial advertising should be to popularise the idea of 'having a good time' and staying young as long as possible. Even the cult of animals, fostered by the newspapers, has probably done its bit towards reducing the birthrate. Nor have the public authorities seriously interested themselves in this question until very recently. Britain today has a million and a half less children than in 1914, and a million and a half more dogs. Yet even now, when the government designs a prefabricated house, it produces a house with only two bedrooms – with room, that is to say, for two children at the most. When one considers the history of the years between the wars, it is perhaps surprising that the birthrate has not dropped more catastrophically than it has. But it is not likely to rise to the replacement level until those in power, as well as the ordinary people in the street, come to feel that children matter more than money.⁽⁷⁰⁾

This quotation is an exact compendium of attitudes which one can find throughout a wide selection of British periodicals, articles, books and broadcasts in the 1940s.

Population-fall anxiety acted as a backdrop to all proclamations and speculations on women, work, the nation and the family, throughout the war. This bears out, to some degree, Orwell's own earlier remark 'Progress and reaction are ceasing to have anything to do with party labels'.⁽⁷¹⁾ At the end of the war pronatalist feeling became both more diffused and more emphatic. It is this which helps, for instance, to make sense of the apparent contradiction that nurseries were both closed at the end of the war, and at the same time hailed as key elements of social progress in party politics overall. The climate of universal pronatalism bathed all pronouncements on 'welfare'

in a certain tint. Not, necessarily, that what appears pink is, if you look at it more closely, really blue; that all postwar birthrate alarm can be taken as undifferentiated reaction as we look back from thirty years on (with the hindsight of information about European fascist eugenics in particular). I'd say, still remembering Orwell, that it's instead a case of Pronatalism, Right or Left. What one is faced with is the task of disentangling 'reactionary' from 'progressive' pronatalist sentiments, and so with the understanding of the meaning of such terms.

The Royal Commission on Population was established in 1944 but did not report until 1949, while the papers of its supporting committees – Statistics, Economics, and Biological and Medical – were not ready until 1950, by which time some of their suppositions and demographical information had become outdated. The brief of the Royal Commission on Population was

To examine the facts relating to the present population trends in Great Britain: to investigate the causes of these trends and to consider their probable consequences: to consider what measures, if any, should be taken in the national interest to influence the future trend of population; and to make recommendations.

After five years' deliberations, the Commission concluded that broad social reforms to aid families were vital if the population were not to sink below replacement level.

The report of the Statistics Committee of the Royal Commission on Population, mentioned 'the striking and largely unexpected increase in the number of births which took place in Great Britain after 1941'. The Statistics Committee itself was going against the tide of the rest of the Royal Commission on Population by being uncertain whether there was really a serious deficiency in the size of families.⁽⁷²⁾ The absence of a 1941 Census presumably helped to fix unmodified the projections based on earlier evidence. The interwar years and the 1940s saw what one demographer has described as 'a considerable literature of immoderate dismay'⁽⁷³⁾ which rested its assumptions on the low birthrates of the 1930s and from those made predictions which fell notably short of subsequent 'achievements'. The sum, for example, of the legitimate and the illegitimate birthrate in 1930 was 743,360: this fell to 666,959 in 1933, then rose through the rest of the 1930s, to fall gradually to a low point of 668,843 in 1941. From there it moved up to 847,419 in 1944, a figure not equalled since 1923, and went on to rise, though unevenly, to 994,173 in 1947, continuing to increase subsequently.⁽⁷⁴⁾

Most demographers of the 1930s and 1940s had worked on the supposition that marital patterns and age-specific mortality would stay as they were, whereas in practice the continued decrease in age of marrying and earlier childbearing together threw out their predictions of a virtually dying population. The most moderate reaction to what was taken almost universally to be a crisis in the birthrate was voiced by the Economics Committee of the Royal Commission. It concluded that despite popular assumptions, stationary, as opposed to increasing, numbers had economic advantages; a point it backed away from, though, by adding that economics was not everything and that 'British traditions, manners and ideas' in the world had to be borne in mind.⁽⁷⁵⁾ Immigration was thus not a desirable means of keeping the population at replacement level as it would in effect 'reduce the proportion of home-bred stock in the population'. Nonetheless, it reported, even allowing for increases in the number of marriages,

The fertility rates of the immediate pre-war years are too low to sustain a stationary

population, and would lead, if maintained, to one that would continuously decline by something like 20% in each successive generation.⁽⁷⁶⁾

In brief, 'the case for reasonable and well-considered measures to mitigate the burden of parenthood is fully made out on economic and social grounds'.⁽⁷⁷⁾ At the same time, such 'measures to aid parents and to improve the care of children will strike at one of the main causes of poverty and malnutrition'.⁽⁷⁸⁾ This was the double edge of the post-war pronatalism – (here in its least alarmist form). While the general target was taken to be at least three and preferably four children per family, this was advocated in a context of social reform. Some of these reforms even materialised, although it's arguable that they would have done so without the pronatalist gift-wrapping.

Improvements in Obstetric and Contraceptive Provision

Democracy in obstetric help, for instance, surfaced at the level of official reports; the 1946 *Survey of Childbearing in Great Britain*, by a joint committee of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Population Investigation Committee referred to the class difference in analgesic and anaesthetic aids in childbirth. One third of the wives of manual workers and two third of the wives of professional and salaried workers had access to these aids. Removing such a lack of parity (partly brought about by issuing midwives with Minnit (gas and air) machines, fitted well with both the democratising aspirations of the National Health Service in prospect, and the fact that the decline in family size (in working class families particularly) to one or two children was causing contemporary alarm. A concern for the 'quality' of the wished-for increase in the population mixed well enough with egalitarianism and the 1945 speech of social democracy. Thus the supply of contraceptives and the dissemination of contraceptive information ran no more counter to pronatalist aims than did the improving of maternity and infant medical care; but, as pronatalists themselves pointed out, furthered such aims by ensuring the 'sensible spacing' of births and parental responsibility. A 'levelling-up' in access to contraception methods and advice by encouraging clinics to deal with the married as well as the medically at risk, served both educative, pro-quality ends and a social-democratic spirit. The *Report on Reproductive Wastage* (meaning still-births, infant mortality, and abortion rates) of the Biological and Medical Committee to the Royal Commission on Population thus held that it should become a duty of the National Health Service, once established, to advise married enquirers on contraception.⁽⁷⁹⁾

While, on the available demographic evidence, it seemed reasonable to almost all political tendencies to express anxiety about the low birthrate – and both Labour and Conservative programmes did so – the non-restriction of British access to contraception was recognised as important. For we were not Germans. The 1949 Population Commission Report again distanced itself carefully from what it understood as reactionary pronatalism:

Concern over the trend of population has led to attempts in some countries, e.g. Germany and Italy, in recent times to narrow the range of women's interests and to 'bring women back into the home'. Such a policy not only runs against the democratic conception of individual freedom, but in Great Britain it would be a rebuking of the tide.⁽⁸⁰⁾

Only harm, it considered, could come from refusing contraceptive education and provision. In similar vein the Fabian evidence of the Royal Commission on Population recommended 'we should have no dealing whatever with obscurantism or denial of facilities' although it held that 'it is indisputable that the persistent decline in the birth-rate is largely due to contraceptive measures'.⁽⁸¹⁾ In 1943 anxiety was pressing enough for *Picture Post* to run a piece entitled 'Why Women Don't Have Babies' by Anne Scott James.⁽⁸²⁾ Rejecting what she called 'the reactionary methods tried out by Germany and Italy' she advocated more nursery schools as part of a package of comforts for mothers of the free nations. Fascism and the refusal of birth control were well enough associated in the general imagination from the early 1940s on.

The newly-acquired contraceptive habits of the working class were criticised in some quarters, however. That a good example should be set by the upper middle classes, the guardians of racial quality, was stressed by the more right-wing pronatalist writers, who also queried the advisability of the spread of any more contraceptive knowledge. 'Apathy', and a lack of 'morale' and faith in the future derived from the war years, were pulled in as explanations for working class contraceptive practices. Mass-Observation's *Britain and her Birthrate* also goes in for this line of enquiry.⁽⁸³⁾ Eva Hubback's *The Population of Britain* was less cautious about voicing the dangers of more efficient contraceptive use; 'This would, by preventing unwanted pregnancies, result in a fall of the birthrate far greater than is usually anticipated'.⁽⁸⁴⁾ Although she supported advice-giving by local health authorities especially for 'those who need it most', the real business was to encourage 'a more courageous and robust faith in life among those who do not want more children owing to a defeatist attitude'.⁽⁸⁵⁾

E. Lewis-Faning's *Report on an Enquiry into Family Limitation*,⁽⁸⁶⁾ for the Royal Commission of Population, asked over 11,000 women about their contraceptive practices and childbearing aims. Apart from 'housing difficulties', he reported 'uncertainty due to the war' as determining contraceptive use, especially in the more recent marriages'. At the end of the war, 'materialist' accounts of the apparently low birthrate turned on the housing shortage. Debating the Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Bill in the House of Commons in September 1944, Mr Cocks (Broxtowe) said, typically tying up birth control with housing restrictions:

The Government say they need larger families. By erecting these houses, however, (he meant the temporary steel bungalows which preceded what became known as 'prefabs') they are more likely to stop child-birth altogether, and instead of calling them Portal bungalows they should be dedicated to Dr. Marie Stopes.⁽⁸⁷⁾

Others were fonder of rejecting such 'economistic' accounts in favour of theories of spiritual despair of varying degrees of ascribed intensity, ranging from a mild anomie to a profound national world-weariness.

Some combination of practical and spiritual encouragements to women to reproduce was the recommendation of the commonsensical of all parties. Roy Harrod, a source of strikingly rightist recommendations to more than one 'family' commission, wrote that, 'even if a spiritual *aufklärung* were capable of having a marked effect on reproduction, it would not be within the power of the public authority to bring it about . . .'⁽⁸⁸⁾ Instead, 'a moral impression' would be best made by 'early Parliamentary action on the material plane'. With a different set of practical plans in mind, the Royal Commission on Population settled for pragmatics too. Armed, by the end of the 1940s, with evidence which started to suggest that at least non-manual workers were

demonstrating 'a reaction against the small family' (as turned out to be the case) they were hesitant about its significance. 'Stimulating the desire for children' would, they reckoned, still be necessary, and any recovery in the birthrate would in any event be a slow business needing official encouragement. Therefore, they wrote, practical steps should be taken to make motherhood a more attractive business:

We believe that the instinctive desire for a family and the realisation of its lasting satisfactions may be relied upon, given reasonable social conditions, to ensure that families will be of sufficient size to replace the population from one generation to another. The problem is to create those social conditions on the assumption of a further spread of the practice of deliberate family limitation.⁽⁸⁹⁾

How were 'social conditions' to be created? As with attitudes to contraception, the analysis of the 'social' left plenty of room for degrees of egalitarianism, or the lack of it. The Royal Commission on Population itself had hopes for nurseries, nursery schools, play centres, laundries to ease the lot of the mother. The Fabian recommendations to ensure family growth included free access for all to obstetric improvements, contraceptive advice and nurseries for 'occasional relief'. Equal educational opportunities were essential too. 'We regard the perpetuation of such differential advantages [private education] as socially indefensible and as detrimental to the raising of the birthrate' they said, on the standard note of egalitarian pronatalist democracy.⁽⁹⁰⁾ While they held that the move to larger families should happen in a period 'which should be the shortest compatible with the need for providing the physical, social and economic circumstances in which women might reasonably be asked to bear children and preferably not longer than ten years', they advised no breeder/non-breeder split.⁽⁹¹⁾ There was 'the desirability of preventing any marked difference in the fertility of different social groups'. Healthy immigrants would help the population problem, and would be 'best suited' if European: 'the eugenics of immigration cannot be overstressed', and 'sound stock' was essential for the national good.⁽⁹²⁾ Pronatalism, egalitarianism, social-democratic and racialist speech were all held together.

While 'women' *en masse* were to be asked to have more children, the particularities of what it ever *means* in practice to 'choose' a pregnancy were rarely queried. Who decided on the form and use of contraception was a consideration passed over silently. Even the most liberal social-democratic writing on the accepted population problem, exemplified in Richard and Kathleen Titmuss' *Parents Revolt*, assumed that childbearing decisions were made by the 'parents' as a unitary force. But the anyway unlikely figure of the always-rational, jointly-deciding couple was then rhetorically covered by the use of 'man':

From an enforced inarticulateness in the nineteenth century, man, by the use of birth control, vents his sense of frustration in the twentieth century by striking against parenthood... The people of Britain have shown in an unmistakable way by their refusal to reproduce that the existing social and economic order just will not do. But this revolution in reproduction is a silent one. When will the ordinary man cease to be silent? It is time he spoke, for the hour is getting late and the future of the nation depends on him.⁽⁹³⁾

Family Allowances

The intermittent debate about the introduction of family allowances, in the 1940s, obviously sat fairly close to contemporary pronatalism. Here too, careful dissociation of England from unpleasant practices in fascist Europe occurred. Both Titmuss, and Beveridge in his *Some Experiences of Economic Control in Wartime* (1940), for example, discounted pronatalism as inspiring the family allowance system and emphasised its social-democratic, ameliorative aspect. Unlike the European programme, Beveridge said, the British one aimed to alleviate poverty and not to raise the birthrate. The origins of family allowances are interesting and elaborate: they can by no means be attributed to socialist impulses alone. The Family Allowances Act was put through by the Coalition government in 1945. It gave the *mother*, (after Eleanor Rathbone's fight) 5s a week for the second child. Whatever the intentions of some advocates of family allowances to dissociate them from pronatalism, they were perceived by their recipients with some cynicism.

This comes out in the Home Intelligence reports quoted by Paul Addison in *The Road to 1945*: 'there will be a catch' said people who were expecting the family allowance to be knocked off their income tax allowance for children again.⁽⁹⁴⁾ And those cited in Mass-Observation's *Britain and her Birthrate* had little faith in the usefulness of 5s. Slater and Woodside's *Patterns of Marriage*, (based on interviews done in 1943 and 1946 with working people in hospital for both 'neurotic' and physical illnesses) reports that:

almost all thought of them (Family Allowances) as an effort to boost the birthrate rather than as an amelioration of hardship for the more prolific. They were taken as an inducement, a bribe, a payment – and a very inadequate one: 'the wife said *she wasn't going to have a baby for five bob a week*'. 'I'd like to see *them* keep a baby on five shillings'. No-one thought that the allowances would have any effect in encouraging fertility generally or that they would influence their own decision. They were judged in relation to their own income and standard and the real cost of a child.⁽⁹⁵⁾

Irrespective then, of the motives of the various campaigners, what these working class families were alert to was the fact that the family allowance debate was pitched in pronatalism. And, Beveridge and Titmuss notwithstanding, some versions of the campaigning were, quite accurately, seen to be more than coincidentally fixed there. For instance, Eva Hubback, long concerned with family reforms and equal rights campaigns, took over the Family Endowment Society after the death of Eleanor Rathbone. Criticising the low rates offered by the 1945 Family Allowances Act, she wrote that such

paltry increases . . . cannot by any stretch of the imagination be expected to stimulate the birth rate – except perhaps for those who may be so much on the margin of financial doubt as to whether to have another child that it takes very little to push them over.

If allowances were to be introduced for first children, this innovation

might do much to reduce the gap between marriage and the child's birth. Not that childbirth at an earlier age can in itself change the small-family pattern, but it may well prevent the stereotyping of a way of life without children.⁽⁹⁶⁾

Nonetheless, sustaining a purely instrumental approach to the question of encouraging family growth was at odds with the set of suppositions which the self-consciously progressive held. Although, for instance, the Fabian evidence to the Royal Commission on Population quoted a 1939 Fabian Research group pamphlet:⁽⁹⁷⁾

It seems that the bulk of the working class population can secure an income above the bare subsistence level only by limiting their family to two children at the most,

they were opposed to what they termed a narrow economism. A pro-child spirit had to be positively infused into the community, and the happiness of parenthood stressed by practical improvements plus an upgrading in its standing.

Similarly pursuing a 'progressive' policy of working on all fronts at once, a PEP (Political and Economic Planning) broadsheet, *Planning*, in 1946 hoped for a levelling-up of maternity provisions which must be accompanied by a change of heart;

If parenthood is to be encouraged, the maternity services must take account of maternal psychology, no less than of maternal mortality, and of social as well as of medical needs.⁽⁹⁸⁾

The tremendous weight attached to the problem of rejuvenating 'morale' was by no means the property of the rightwing pronatalist writers. The degree of conservatism can be gauged by the spirit in which 'morale' was understood – whether as susceptible to being raised by pragmatic improvements in the social conditions for having children, or whether in a rhetoric of nationalism alone. G.D.H. Cole came down on 'morale' as the 'most significant determinant on the birthrate': noting the upswing in marriages and births after 1940, he concluded that all turned 'on whether the people of this country feel on the whole hopeful or pessimistic about the future'.⁽⁹⁹⁾ The 'progressive' approach at the end of the war was defined by whether you took the line that material improvements could flesh out 'morale' effectively and raise the country's spirit after its demoralisation by war. But 'progressiveness' was committed to the importance of a shift of feeling as well as practical aids. Pearl Jephcott, (who has to be placed as a socialist sociologist), wrote about her alarm over the 'fashion' for smaller families among the working class girls she interviewed. Though many of them remembered the continual exhaustion of their own mothers who had had large families, she thought that more intangible non-material causes were at work:

Despite all this, these girls on the whole give one the impression that it is something more subtle than the pictures, or lack of money, or being tied, that has influenced them; something which is allied to the fact that they are not fundamentally happy enough themselves to say 'Life is O.K. Let's give it to plenty of other people.'⁽¹⁰⁰⁾

Equal Pay

The equal pay debate was also flying in the contemporary wind of birthrate anxiety. The Fabian women's group submitted evidence to the Royal Commission on Equal

Pay in 1944, which argued that the introduction of equal pay would not have a 'dysgenic effect' on the birth-rate. Women would not be tempted to flee marriage and maternity for the attractions of an equal wage – if mothers were recognised and maternity no longer entailed 'being a slave to a broken sink or a decayed and obsolete coal-range'. In this they followed the position adopted by the Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations on the social need to adequately value the work of mothers in the home and treat them as 'workers' too. The Fabian women's group had to argue on all sides at once:

We do not . . . accept the assumption . . . that the desire for children and for home-making has become so weak among British women that the introduction of reasonable rates of pay would cause a stampede away from the home; but we do not hold that sweating the mass of wage-earning women is a sensible or civilised way of persuading them to have children.⁽¹⁰¹⁾

The Royal Commission on Equal Pay (1944-46) was appointed officially, in the words of its own preface, to:

examine the existing relationship between the remuneration of men and women in the public services, in industry and in other fields of employment: to consider the social, economic and financial implications of the claim to equal pay for equal work, and to report.

The members of the Royal Commission on Equal Pay themselves speculated about the possible effects of equal pay on the birthrate, but felt that on that point they could reach 'not only conjectural, but meagre' conclusions. The Communist Party's evidence to the Commission dismissed such anxiety as pointless, and indicated the rising of the birthrate during the war, which had been a time of high and better-paid employment for women. The socialist economist Joan Robinson in her submission argued that while women's earnings and careers would be disturbed by childbirth and bringing up of children, men would continue to earn more on average. There was no 'economic justification for adding artificial handicaps to the natural one'. And, she wrote, 'cheap labour tends to be wasted, like salt on the side of a dinner plate'.⁽¹⁰²⁾ Cheap labour was women's labour. Certain conservative opinion, on the other hand, was prepared to submit that there were 'social causes [reasons for keeping] for unequal pay', one of which, in Roy Harrod's memorandum, was 'to secure that motherhood as a vocation is not too unattractive financially compared with work in the professions industry, or trade'.⁽¹⁰³⁾ The Commissioners themselves commented:

Ignoring the fluctuations due to war, the spread of feminist ideas has operated in recent decades both to enhance the demand for women's labour and to expand the supply . . . If, now, an upward revaluation of the occupied women's standard of living were to coincide with a withdrawal of women from the market in response to a swing of social opinion in favour of motherhood and home life, such an improvement of standard might prove to be maintainable . . . even in the absence of a further rise in the intensity of the demand for women's labour.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾

The arguments over the introduction of equal pay then immediately after the war were, like those for family allowances and the provision of contraception, at least

shaded with pronatalist thought. I want now to concentrate on 'the mother' as the intense focus of pronatalism.

PRONATALISM: THE MOTHER

The welter of proposed improvements for both mothers and families is quite dazzling at first glimpse. Immediately after the war, 'comforts for free mothers' continued to be raised by social theorists within a broad social-democratic or liberal drift which crossed party boundaries. On the question of the mother, who was not a social-democrat?

There is a huge literature, concentrated in 1945 and 1946, which argues for nurseries, after-school play centres, rest homes for tired housewives, family tickets on trains, official neighbourhood babysitters, holidays on the social services for poorer families, proper access to good gynaecological and obstetric help for everyone, a revolution in domestic architecture towards streamlined rational kitchens and a good number of bedrooms, more communal restaurants and laundries. Eva Hubback's suggestions in *The Population of Britain* included marriage guidance clinics, adult education classes which would teach 'hygiene, family relationships, child管ments and the domestic crafts', and 'education in family living' as part of the new school curriculum. Houses should be purpose built for the larger families of the future; women should be able to work part-time if they wished; the marriage-bar should go; and a training in civic values and 'citizenship' should be diffused through all educational levels. The recommendations of the 1946 Survey of *Childbearing in Great Britain* (by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists) also mentioned adult education in 'domestic relationships' and 'preparation for family life' including sex education and household skills in schools. The 1949 Report of the Royal Commission on Population advocated a package of income tax reliefs, nurseries, improved house design, washing machines on the hire purchase system, a network of family holiday camps. The Fabian evidence to this Commission was also in favour of nursery schools, family travelling opportunities, education in citizenship, a system of effective financial aids to parents, including a marriage bonus 'to take the form of orders on shopkeepers for utility furniture and household equipment up to the specified amount'. Use should be made here, they wrote, of the Council of Industrial Design's new handbook.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ Cash benefits for new mothers could be supplemented by baby things in kind, like prams. In 1948, Beveridge himself recommended 'holidays for housewives' and pointed to the example of the Lancashire Council of Social Service's home, the Brentwood Recuperative Centre for Mothers and Children. 'The housewife may at times be as much in need of rehabilitation to do her job as a crash-shocked airman or injured workman'.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ Beveridge also approved of the 1945 Reilly plan which proposed 'a return to the village green' in a new architecture, including the communalising of cooking and washing to ease the hard and isolated life of the housewife.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

Examples of these mixes of practical improvements, domestic innovations, and pronatalist devices could be multiplied indefinitely: it is the tight meshing of these elements which is so noticeable in retrospect. By 1945 the universal tone of social democratic policy on the family had been so often invoked that its repetitions began to look flattened and exhausted themselves, like the housewives' lives they sought to improve. (What happened to even Orwell's prose style in the long extract quoted above is an indication of this).

Contemporary feminism tends to assume that ‘the postwar rehabilitation of the family’ really was a concerted drive to revive traditional values after the demoralisation of war, to rewrite the nuclear family after the closing of war nurseries and the return of women to the home. But reading contemporary books and articles makes it clear that ‘the family’ was a preoccupation all through the war; that anticipation of postwar social reforms had a wider base than the immediate clustering of excitement around the Beveridge report on *Social Insurance and Allied Services* in 1942; and that there was no imposed and concerted drive to reinstate the family ‘from above’ at the immediate end of the war. The social reforms introduced by the Labour government in 1945 were in this sense a consolidation of what had been established under the Coalition government. The Reconstruction Priorities Committee was set up in 1943 to pursue Beveridge’s proposals: in November that year, a new Cabinet Committee on Reconstruction was announced, with Lord Woolton as Minister. (Surveys and investigations on postwar reconstruction had been well established earlier, however, including the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey which was instituted in 1941.)

In 1940, Orwell had written:

There are wide gradations of income, but it is the same kind of life that is being lived at different levels in labour-saving flats or council houses, along the concrete roads and in the naked democracy of the swimming-pools. It is a rather restless, cultureless life, centering around tinned food, Picture Post, the radio and the internal combustion engine.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

But how accurate was this sense of a universal cultural flattening? My inclination now is to take 1945-7 as the period of self-exhaustion of a homogenising social-democratic emphasis on ‘the family’ which had been running through the war – as opposed to the more orthodox view that the pronouncements of 1945 were fresh moments of Labour family policy, a new end-of-the-war egalitarianism. In this light, I would describe that particularly intense concentration on ‘the mother’ which got going in 1945-6 as a symptom/indication of the impossibility of holding together, at the level of language, the unity of ‘the family’, once the end of the war had dissolved its rhetorical appeal. Orwell’s fine phrase, ‘the naked democracy of the swimming-pool’ ironically spins off from a rhetoric impossible to sustain for long after the war. The generality of ‘the family’, too, was less voiced after 1945.

For if you look for some uniform postwar movement to ‘rehabilitate the family’, it cannot be traced. Instead a series of specialised agencies, like the development of psychiatric social work, ‘open up’ only certain kinds of families to corrective inspection, like the revived category of ‘the problem family’. Looking for the responsibility of family members for breakdowns in family functioning, they settle increasingly on the mother. (Not that 1945 was in any way unprecedented in its growing emphasis on the mother: rather it marks one of many watersheds in the periodic invocations of the family.) One of the strongest attempts to hold together the unity of ‘the family’, pre-1945, is evidenced, I’d think, through the many depictions of the family as a cellular organism in the body politic of the state and the community. Family health was a building block in the edifice of national health, spiritual or physical. That extraordinary book, written by a woman doctor and a woman sociologist about a South London health centre, *The Peckham Experiment*⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ of 1943, is one long metaphor of the family as a biological organism, a vital cell in the body of the national

whole. The predominance of the vocabulary of 'citizenship' in 1945 to 1947, especially in Fabian writings, could be understood as an equivalent of the neutral wholeness which 'the family' had. The blank face of 'the citizen' possessed neither class nor gender: as a political notion it simply refused all those differences, social and sexual, in its aspirations for an egalitarian democracy. These 'the family' as a social notion also concealed.

One of the clearest instances of this new aiming at the mother is the *manner* in which the postwar retention of nurseries was argued. The very widespread pro-nursery sentiments of the late 1940s were perfectly congruent with familialism. Nurseries were advocated as key points for educating mothers through influence and precept: on the grounds of class egalitarianism; as easing the strain of the housing shortage; and as conducive to raising the birthrate.

Both conservative and social-democratic educationalists argued that nursery schools were an invaluable means of instruction for mothers, and might be utilised too for teaching 'mothercraft' to adolescent girls. The many postwar proposals for conveying first-aid to tired mothers shaded into allegations of 'fecklessness' and incompetence which could be remedied by on-the-spot instruction. 'Help' and 'training' were close neighbours in this literature; as in the tart comment in *Our Towns*, the result of investigations by the Hygiene Committee of the Women's group on Public Welfare:

We cannot afford not to have the nursery school: it seems to be the only agency capable of cutting the slum mind off at its root and building the whole child while yet there is time.⁽¹¹⁰⁾

Advocacy of nurseries as adjuncts to motherhood training was adopted not only by the classically conservative but by the Fabian humanists too: early in the war a Fabian pamphlet had argued that the Ministry of Health must make more adequate plans for nurseries since there the mother would learn about 'nutrition, cleanliness, and correct physical education... She will at once make use of this knowledge in her own home'.⁽¹¹¹⁾ In 1945 the Fabians again recommended the judicious use of nurseries for democratising ends: 'to provide the freedom from family cares which the well-to-do mother provides for herself'.⁽¹¹²⁾ The main argument, however, was not egalitarian, but pronatalist; or more accurately, egalitarianism about the family was already written into pronatalism at this point. Mothers were to be freed by the provision of nurseries as a precaution against personal, 'therefore' family, breakdowns: and they were to be freed for having more children.

The pronatalist use-value of nurseries was a platform common to the relatively progressive and the more conservative. The strong support of the 1949 Royal Commission on Population for nursery provisions has already been mentioned; nurseries were vital to combat the chances of family size slipping below replacement level:

There arises among responsible and intelligent women of all classes an acute sense of conflict between having children and leading what they regard as a tolerable life... services should be developed so as to cater as much for the needs of mothers with young children for occasional help and relief in normal circumstances as for help in emergencies... even children under two may suffer no harm from an occasional spell of a few hours in a day nursery... The general aim should be to reduce the work and worry of mothers with young children.⁽¹¹³⁾

That nurseries, by reducing domestic strains, would make the having of babies a more tolerable prospect, was claimed somewhat desperately by those whose first interest was not in population figures but in saving nursery education. 'Motherhood must be made less of a drudgery and anxiety, if we are to secure the birthrate figures on which our national welfare and status depends' ran a letter to *The Times* from a nursery movement supporter.⁽¹¹⁴⁾

And state-provided childcare could cement marriages, since it would ease tension caused by overcrowding. Nursery demands fed into housing demands very neatly. In the House of Commons adjournment motion on the fate of the wartime nurseries, for instance, in March 1945, pro-nursery MPs argued that if they were retained, housing, 'the basis of responsible, healthy family life', would be made more bearable where it was bad. Nurseries would hold marriages together and hence save the birthrate by taking the stress off the wife: the husband need no longer 'escape to pub or politics one is as bad as the other if it splits the home'.⁽¹¹⁵⁾ That a vigorous nurseries programme would create 'happy homes' in a demoralised postwar population was claimed by Labour and Tory members alike: the one significant variation was the Labour plea on the grounds of class parity of access to childcare – the rich could buy nannies. A 1945 deputation of professional nursery workers and others to the Ministries of Health and Labour similarly appealed to the need to avoid family collapse through overcrowding: 'emergency in housing is an emergency in family life and nurseries could do invaluable help in relieving the overpressed mother'.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ The Ministry of Health's own brief remarked on

a feeling in many parts of the House that wartime nurseries should not simply be closed when their justification as an aid to war production ended, but that they should be continued, at least while housing and other wartime difficulties added to the burdens on the housewife.⁽¹¹⁷⁾

None of these considerations brought about a national network of postwar nurseries. But my point here is not so much whether these multiple grounds of appeal worked in practice or not: but that the acute questions of childcare provision and other reforms central to the daily lives of women and children were decisively captured by a discourse in which the figure of 'the mother' was continuously produced as both cause and object of all these reforming movements.

It can be argued that real progress was made out of all this, as we have seen: access to contraceptive and obstetric services was improved and democratised to some extent; children in care received fresh consideration, family allowances were introduced. These were gains in line with the long-voiced demands of women's labour organisations and were significant advances, however imperfect and flawed their implementation. This was a contemporary perspective. G.D.H. Cole observed, for instance, about the new social security plans:

The opinion of today credits women and children with individual rights and claims of their own. it is not so ready as its fore-runners to say that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children, or even upon the mother, or so sure that family life thrives best when women and children were offered up as victims to its sanctity.⁽¹¹⁸⁾

That serious and humanitarian advances had been begun by postwar family policies was widely assumed by contemporary socialists and social-democrats: even if the material gains were slight in practice, as with family allowances, the principle was respected while the 5s a week was derided. This position, though, as the Women's Co-operative Guild's resolution mentions, depended on some conviction about the longer-term possibilities of a progressive capitalism. And although social policy developments did in some lights treat women and children as separate family members, the conception of family as *the* social unit continued unscathed. Women were mothers within and with reference to the family, both socially and economically. Although mothers were indeed addressed in their own right this was not *in itself* any guarantee of a political advance, even if it held the promise of practical gains.

There is a crucial difference between invoking 'the mother' and speaking about the practical needs of women with children: the first is a rhetoric of function and static position; the second discusses sexual-social differences in a way which does not fix it under the appearance of eternity. To say this is perfectly compatible with acknowledging that certain real if circumscribed aims were achieved in the lives of women with children. But postwar pronatalist opinion did not of itself produce such gains even if it acted as a spur – they had other and older origins.

FEMINISMS AND PRONATALISM

The risks of the metaphor of the mother as worker in the home, in a climate of pronatalism, are doubtless clearer in retrospect. After the war, a redescription of the housewife as worker deserving special safeguards occurred on several fronts. Beveridge took it up himself in his *Voluntary Action: A report on Methods of Social Advance*.⁽¹¹⁹⁾ Some nursery supporters suggested that the working conditions of mothers could be improved by an entitlement to one day off a week. The raising of the housewife's status and the recognition of the essential nature of her work could be enshrined in legislating for a half share in her husband's salary. This was advocated by Edward Hulton in articles like 'Wages for Wives' in *Picture Post*⁽¹²⁰⁾ and by Edith Summerskill in Parliament who was quoted in 1943 as attributing the decline in family size to women's 'revolt' against their lack of any legal right to share the male wage.⁽¹²¹⁾ That 'housewives and mothers' – the two so often named in the same breath that they might have been one hyphenated occupational category – did 'real and vital work' became a cliché of 1945 and 1946. The architects of reasoned kitchens were fond of it, the Fabian homage to the community and the ideals of citizenship relied on it, and its currency was such that its manifestation in certain kinds of feminist literature was unsurprising.

The evidence of the Fabian Society to the Royal Commission on Population, for example, is a vivid instance of the inscription of one kind of feminism in familialism. It understood feminism as contributing to the spirit of participatory democracy, the humanisation of the lives of wives and mothers which inducted them into the community. Women need no longer be subjected to that 'narrowing of the women's horizon which is caused by childbearing and child-rearing'. The woman who was

tied to the house at weekends or in the evenings by the need to look after young children is deprived of those opportunities for recreation in company with her husband which form a normal part of the married life of childless couples. This is a severe hardship which affects the quality of married life.⁽¹²²⁾

For although parenthood must always entail sacrifice, ‘it would be neither possible nor desirable to relieve them (parents) from the care of their offspring’; ‘the community’ must share the burden of its parents. Motherhood was an important job: but marriage alone was no justification for abstention from work. Not only that, but

a woman, like a man, has a duty to the community to work to the full extent of her capacities all her working life and...the exercise of her special function of maternity cannot occupy her fulltime for more than a portion of it.⁽¹²³⁾

More part-time jobs should therefore be available, and jobs in which the experience of maternity afforded a positive advantage – teaching and welfare work. Rearing a family should be a joint task of wife and husband: both boys and girls should be trained for parenthood. The democratisation of marriage, according to Fabian futurology, would accompany the spread of part-time work for mothers:

The mothers who choose to spend their whole time in looking after the children when they are small – which is what the majority of mothers will always do – must realise that they should give part-time service to the community when the children are older. If society solves the problem of how they are going to get help, in their job of caring for the children when small, they must in turn help to get some tasks to put meaning into their lives when the children are gone. A democratic society cannot tolerate parasites, and married women who are not pulling their weight should be recognised as parasites.⁽¹²⁴⁾

In sum, it continues, mothers should be freed to go out – but with their husbands, and in order to strengthen their marriages. They should be wholehearted fulltime mothers, yet be ready to resign from work for the sake of ‘the community’. They should be aided by social and economic reforms, but so that they could more easily have more and better children. The Fabian ideal of the ‘new marriage’ was ‘teamwork’ between husband and wife: Fabian feminism tended to look back, half-bored and half-scandalised, at the lamentable separatism of its mothers’ generation. In place of that ‘sex-antagonism’, it hoped that new husbands and wives would constitute a marital team: this was analogous to the Communist Party’s leaflets recommending parity on the shop floor:- ‘The country’s ideas have had a good shake-up... Men and women are becoming comrades’. The truly significant unit of society in the Fabianism of this period was the family: women ought to have breaks and holidays, but these ‘need to be thought of in terms of the family and not from the viewpoint of the individual member of the family group’. In short,

what is really involved is a new set of values which will allow women to take their proper place in society, as mothers, workers and citizens.⁽¹²⁵⁾

In the aspirations of 1945 progressiveness, women in production would work on the same terms as men; women at home, i.e. mothers, would pull their weight within ‘the community’, that de-classed terrain of pure sociability. Fabian social-democratic idealism, which described itself as including feminism, effectively collapsed sexual difference into a brisk citizenship, trampling over the solid intricacies of both class and gender: except for maternity, where it fell in with the tenets of a broad pronatalism, liberally understood.

The responses of other self-declared feminist and women's labour organisations to the emphasis on 'the mother' and the anxieties about a dwindling British population were varied, stemming in part from their different pre-war political histories and forms of agitation. In these histories lie answers to the question which strikes post-1968 feminism: why was pronatalism not roundly and universally rejected *as such*, as inimical to the 'interests' of women?

Immediately after the war, there was no unified and dominant single feminist politics: not only in the sense in which there never is, but as evidenced by a proliferation of small groups whose stated objectives often overlap, and so raise questions about why they did not or could not unite. There was no single stance of feminism in relation to women's labour organisations and political groupings: and no simple opposition of 'bourgeois feminism' to a feminism which understood women's work needs, either. The difficulty now is in getting a sense of the relative weights and impact of the myriad groups which existed as the diverse heirs of the feminist tradition at the end of the war. No one vigorous feminist platform was there to take up the half-revealed senses of unhappiness with the terms of women's wartime involvement: although some issues, most strikingly the government's intentions to award a lower rate of compensation to women disabled through war injuries⁽¹²⁶⁾, aroused an anger which might have inspired a coherent feminism in other conditions.

Instead, the literature of the many women's organisations gives the general impression that feminism as a political philosophy was associated with the 'sex-antagonism' of an older generation which had been outgrown: it was acceptable as an adjunct to achieving legislative and social 'equality' for women, for filling out the promises of social democracy between the sexes. The groups which at the end of the war stood for 'equality' concentrated on pursuing single issues and, often, parliamentary lobbying, to the exclusion of a feminism with any spirit at the level of broad theory. In so far as war conditions revived potential feminist thought, this was often held to be an ambiguous development: Margaret Goldsmith, in *Women at War*, said:

The older women in Parliament and elsewhere have again become feminists, and feminism . . . is rearing its head again. Whether this indeed implies progress or retrogression is another matter . . . it seems a pity that the feminist issue has not been finally settled before 1939 or during the war. For the fact remains that 'feminism' will have a very real meaning until there is real equality between the sexes.⁽¹²⁷⁾

Feminism as a philosophy was, at the end of the war, understood as only transitionally necessary: its function was to spur on the measuring of equality.

Those groups, avowedly feminist or not, still extant in 1945 and dedicated to pursuing equality on many fronts included the Married Women's Association, founded in 1938, which made a demand for the joint ownership of home and income in marriage; the National Women Citizen's Association; St Joan's Social and Political Alliance, a Catholic women's organisation for 'the practical application of the Christian principle of equality between the sexes': the Women for Westminster Movement; the Women's Freedom League; the Open Door Council; the Six-Point Group, founded in 1918 to battle for equality on the six fronts of the political, occupational, moral, social, economic and legal; the National Union of Women Teachers; the Housewives' League; the National Association of Women Civil Servants; the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, founded in 1870 by Josephine Butler for the

reform of the laws on prostitution. This list is far from exhaustive, and does not convey the high degree of coinciding of aims amongst these organisations: the Status of Women Committee was formed after the war as an umbrella organisation for many of them. What is urgently needed to clarify the political history of feminism in Britain is an analysis of the fragmentation of these groups; starts are being made on this front.⁽¹²⁸⁾

One wartime organisation attacked the sexually-neutral category of 'the citizen', so dear to Fabians, by demanding that it should be implemented in a full, non-gender-discriminating way. The Women's Publicity Planning Association was formed in 1943 to back the Equal Citizenship (Blanket) Bill, the inspiration of the feminist and former WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union) member, Dorothy Evans. The idea was a once-and-for-all equal opportunities sweep across the legislative board: hence 'Blanket'. A three-clause draft Bill, it aimed to make illegal all Parliamentary or Common Law Acts which contained any sex-based discrepancies: it included, for instance, the demand that income-sharing between husband and wife be mandatory, that factory 'protection' be extended to men too. It had the support of the Six-Point Group, and prominent progressives like Dr Joad. A demonstration for it took place in July 1944 in Trafalgar Square, overshadowed by 'rain and flybombs': the death of Dorothy Evans later that year, though, entailed the collapse of the Bill's presence, at a point when she had been trying to get it sponsored by one of the parliamentary parties.⁽¹²⁹⁾

Many of the women's political organisations in the 1940s were numerically small and relied heavily on the energies of their few members. Few said anything directly on postwar population anxieties: the perspective of 'equality' was indeed not broad enough to let them. There is one notable exception here, but it is something of a maverick: the one self-declaredly feminist group which did oppose pronatalism was the Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker, an organisation which was an assembly of national Councils. The British section was founded in 1926 by Elizabeth Abbott and Chrystal MacMillan. Elizabeth Abbott, closely involved with the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, was also the joint author of a pamphlet, *The Woman Citizen and Social Security*, which argued against Beveridge's proposals for married women as being adversely discriminatory.⁽¹³⁰⁾ The aims of the Open Door International and its Councils were:

To secure that a woman shall be free to work and protected as a worker on the same terms as a man, and that legislation and regulations dealing with conditions and hours, payment, entry and training shall be based upon the nature of the work and not upon the sex of the worker: and to secure for a woman, irrespective of marriage and childbirth, the right at all times to decide whether or not she shall engage in paid work and to ensure that no legislation or regulations shall deprive her of this right.

The first International Conference in 1938 had carried a resolution from Denmark deprecating pronatalism as against the interests of women in the labour market, 'both in dictator states like Germany and Italy and in democratic states'. 'Progressive' versions of pronatalism, as in Scandinavia, were:

stated to serve not only the promotion of a higher fertility, but at the same time to secure better social and moral conditions of family life and the safeguarding of motherhood. In spite of these good intentions the danger is facing us. Old

prejudices and traditional views are still prevailing in this domain, so closely connected with the most conservative elements of society, marriage and motherhood.⁽¹³¹⁾

The next International Conference in 1948 again reiterated its opposition to pronatalist moves as in effect attacks on working women. It noted:

that in certain countries propaganda for an increased population has been and is being carried on in a manner which is tending to lead to an action against the work of married women outside their home: and that the woman is being increasingly looked on not as an independent personality, a complete human being but rather as a medium for the production of children. The work of the housewife and mother is being presented in such a way as to persuade many women, contrary often to their real wishes, to remain in the home and to consider it and it alone their 'proper place'... Such propaganda held immense dangers for women of every class, particularly as regards educational, vocational, professional and technical opportunities: it will also militate against proper apprenticeship.⁽¹³²⁾

The Open Door's policy was the refusal of the 'protection of motherhood' – 'some-one makes a proposal to restrict women's work and calls it "protection". And this protection becomes a fetish' –⁽¹³³⁾ as in practice antagonistic to the needs of women workers, especially where it was tied into population alarms. Instead it wished to maintain the principle of equal protection for all workers regardless of gender – 'we must demand the protection of men and boys'. One British conference delegate made a gender-inverted polemic out of this:

...one reason why the population problem is becoming such a danger to the position of women (is that) it brings with it the tendency to look for the wrong causes for the decline in the birth rate and to impose one-sided restrictions, called 'protection' on women workers as they are the 'mothers of the race' without equally protecting the men, quite forgetting their function as fathers of the race!⁽¹³⁴⁾

Maternity, according to the Open Door International, ought not to be treated as a gender-specific incapacity, for in practice, special conditions for working child-bearing women forced them to a low standard of life, low wage rates, and low nutrition and thereby defeated their own object: it ought instead to be dealt with by sickness benefit, common to both sexes as a cover for a temporary inability to work which was divorced from gender and therefore not spread over the rest of life.

The Open Door groups, active though they were as critics (of the ILO's reports on working women in particular) and as publicists, were without the weight or constituency of the women's labour organisations: they were subject at times, too, to internal tensions about their class composition and professional bias. One speaker at a conference, Annie Taylor, 'felt there was still a cleavage between the intellectual and the industrial woman worker, and a desire to teach the woman worker how to spend her money'. This point was contested by others, including Maud White who commented, 'those members with more leisure should seek to help, not to instruct industrial working women'.⁽¹³⁵⁾

Women's labour organisations, on the other hand, seized on the postwar

pronatalist moment differently: they used it to exploit their own long-established concern for the conditions of the working-class mother, rather than attacking its abstract promotion of maternity. In the teeth of complaints about the falling birthrate and the dereliction of maternal duties, the Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations (SJCWWO) said bitterly, in their evidence to the Royal Commission on Population,

In a period when nearly every section of workers was enjoying improved conditions through Trade Union and Parliamentary action, those who were engaged in the biggest single occupation in the country – that of working housewife and mother – began to buy a little leisure with the tin-opener and birth control. If this has led to unfortunate results for the community, the community must bear its blame for the neglect of the home.⁽¹³⁶⁾

Forced, in the 1930s, into arguments about whether an idle addiction to tinned salmon on the part of working class wives contributed to their malnutrition and maternal morbidity⁽¹³⁷⁾ organisations like the SJCWWO's Industrial Organisations had insistently defended the needs of housewives as mothers. The long battle of women's labour groupings for the material 'protection of motherhood' – for improved maternity services, access to hospital treatment and doctors, for birth control advice – appeared to coincide with the demands of a broad postwar pronatalism for raising the status of motherhood, even though this coincidence was more verbal and rhetorical than political. The reaction of women's labour groupings like the Women's Co-operative Guild, the conferences of unions catering for women workers, and the Labour Party advisory committee was, on the whole, to object to pronatalism in so far as this took the form of criticism of working women, and instead to argue for the *real* needs of mothers in the home. They publicised their knowledge of the poverty which attended the invisibility of working-class mothers, especially in the depressed areas where women continued to suffer the conditions documented in, for instance, Margery Spring-Rice's *Working-Class Wives* (1939, Virago reprint, 1981).

The SJCWWO illustrates this strategy in action. In their 1946 leaflets they accepted, as did everyone, the dangers of a shrinking population, but seized the time to insist that mothers would not have more children unless their working conditions were improved. This point they repeated to the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, as well as to the Royal Commission on Population. In their own pamphlet, *Reports on Population Problems and Postwar Organisation of Private Domestic Employment*, they said that 'the real issue' over the birthrate 'was one of confidence' in peacetime social and economic conditions. Confidence necessitated higher children's allowances, housing for bigger families, electric washing machines. The SJCWWO had forwarded a memorandum in 1943 to the Dudley committee, on *The Design and Equipment of Postwar Houses*. Like many, they hoped for the continuation of the British Restaurant principle, for nursery schools to relieve the housing stress, for children beyond the school-leaving age to receive grants to be able to stay on. Nonetheless, they vigorously dissented from social-democratic orthodoxy and conservative thought on the matter of motherhood classes in schools:

We deprecate suggestions that are sometimes put forward for instruction in Parentcraft in Schools, or even for allotting a considerable part of the school curriculum to such subjects as Housewifery.⁽¹³⁸⁾

The social services, they held, should make a free choice possible for women – to stay at home with her family or to work but not under economic compulsion. Both the male wage and female labour should be recognised as contributing to the home and so joint ownership should follow; maternity grants, labour saving devices, leisure chances would together raise women's status. For the woman with children in the home 'is doing work which has a social value as great as that of much of the work done outside'.

This is where the SJCWWO withdrew from what it understood feminism to be:

Some of the earlier feminist propaganda, with its emphasis on equality in the fields of work previously closed to women merely on grounds of sex, tended to perpetuate the idea that the work of a home and children is of less importance than work outside the home, a less eligible career than most others, and may have helped to influence some women against motherhood. This attitude was found chiefly in middle-class and professional groups and is probably less usual today than it was twenty-five years ago. Our working women's organisations have never accepted it, and, while insisting on the right of women to follow the work of their choice, they have worked for many years for a better status for the work of the wife and mother in the home.⁽¹³⁹⁾

The trouble was that once feminism became associated by women's labour organisations like the SJCWWO with the single, childless and professionally-ambitious bourgeoisie (however good the reasons for this association seemed to be) then an explicit feminism could not be used in the fight for better conditions for working-class mothers. And in the absence anyway of a loud and visible confrontation by self-described feminists with postwar pronatalism, then the ground of concern for the mother was most publicly captured by pronatalism. Women's labour organisations were faced with the task of insisting on the differences between their old history of trying to improve the lives of working women and mothers, and the newer twists in postwar pronatalism. Class parity, democracy and humaneness were the most obvious grounds of appeal. But these concepts alone could not generate the bases for criticising the entrenched rhetoric of the family and the supposition of rigid sexual division of labour which were part of pronatalism. Only a critical feminist political philosophy could have generated this impulse, and that was not, apparently, historically available.

In its absence, it was all the more possible for the verbal formulations of an intendedly socialist 'protection of motherhood' to coincide with pronatalist writings. Where women's labour organisations did polemically employ the housewife/worker analogy, there was the risk of obscuring the complicated needs of those women with children who did waged work, whether through need or choice. The effect of the universal stress on the Mother was to create two irreconcilable parties: the housewife-mother and the woman worker. The latter was implicitly de-sexed because after the war, discussion about childcare provision increasingly turned on the needs of the industrial productivity drive and therefore withered away as industrial needs changed. Working women with children became an invisible category, overlooked from virtually all perspectives.

The simple assertion that mothers are workers, too, is always empty in that form. However radical a defence of the lives of working women it aims at, it is nevertheless prone to deeply conservative uses, especially at points of pronatalist alarm which seeks to 'preserve the family' and 'protect motherhood' in a way which marks off 'the mother' as a separate species-being. On the other hand, it would be mistaken to stop at

the assumption that an emphasis on the needs of mothers is irretrievably and solely reactionary because it serves to reinstate the Mother. It may well do this: and in 1945 it did. But 'needs', however transitional, are material enough; if you as a woman are solely responsible for the household shopping, then you need time to do it as a wage-worker. British pronatalism never in fact became substantiated in social policies which delivered the planned packages of relief to tired mothers, in or out of paid work. Had these packages arrived (and compare the situation of Germany in the 1930s, where pronatalist policies *were* enacted) they could have been exploited whatever their ideological provenance. That is, you rapidly make use of a nursery place if you are allotted one at a moment of scarcity, whether or not you get it on the grounds of being a 'deviant mother'. For needs are both substantive and highly subject to being 'ideologically' met. But the meeting of needs out of one sort of intention does not guarantee that its received effect will match that original intention.

Assessing the conservatism of social policies makes it necessary to ask: what fixes social 'roles' and what has the effect of eroding them? One way of putting the question in Britain between 1945 and 1948 is to ask whether we are concerned with a potential transition, via the envisaged large-scale employment of women with children, to the dissolution of motherhood as a rôle, a profession in itself – a fresh twist on Engels? Or, on the other hand, the advent of the mother as worker with exaggeratedly special needs, which thereby confirm her as the Mother and facilitate her easy disposability from the labour market?

This generates a further speculation: under what conditions might the employment of mothers act to loosen the category of 'being a mother'? Instead, that is, of sharpening the distinction between housewife-mother and working woman to the detriment of both. The possible answers to that are: only if the employment of all women was universal, only in an economy in a rare state of desperation, long-term desperation, for any native labour. (Soviet Russia at certain points comes to mind.) Or else the mirage of a society so profoundly committed to egalitarianism that it would pay for the social provisions needed, and furnish conceptual revisions about the sexual division of labour too. Short of these conditions, the employment in practice of only some women with children, and their ghettoisation on the labour market, can serve to maintain a strong and often damaging gulf between working women and mothers and housewives, one subject to unpleasant shifts in real or imputed class alignment.

I'll conclude this section by returning to the terrain of postwar social democracy with a book influential among British progressives: Alva Myrdal's *Nation and Family* of 1945. Admired for its Swedish clear-headedness by several English pronatalists, including Eva Hubback, it is a great text for those addicted to conspiracy theories too. It suggests that those women with low wages and several children should be 'enabled' to stay at home, ideologically supported by deliberately-revived opinion:

For these cases, typified in the charwoman, all the old reactionary concerns about the conflict between motherhood and wage earning ought to be mobilised . . . the greater the ability to pay for domestic work and the more personally desired the job is, the less opposition there ought to be to women combining their work with motherhood.⁽¹⁴⁰⁾

Careers were for the well-off. The situation in which, all other things remaining unchanged, only *some* mothers work lends itself with a fatal facility to the depiction of socially-tolerated career women who buy their childcare, versus unskilled wage-slaves

who should, at best, be paid off to go home and be 'real mothers'. And when 'the way forward' for working mothers is caught, as with much feminist-progressiveness of the mid-1940s, in a rhetoric of 'marriage as teamwork', then the re-writing of the family becomes the new democracy. Alva Myrdal commented that pronatalist interests were best served by a reversal of the tactic of demanding the right to work for married women. Instead, 'defending the right of the working woman to marry and have children becomes a protection of, and not a threat to family values.'⁽¹⁴¹⁾ For the gradual repeal of marriage bars and the greater official tolerance of the employment of married women would, she wrote, serve to discourage abortions and illegitimacy (where pregnancy would no longer entail loss of jobs) and extramarital affairs (since it would be possible to be openly married and continue in paid work). The phenomenon of married women working, far from destroying the family,

ultimately serves the truly conservative goals of protecting the formal marriage rites and facilitating childbearing for a growing group of women.⁽¹⁴²⁾

In an intelligently-run social democracy, according to this writer, the goals of comradeley marriages, employment for those who could afford to buy private childcare, and a higher birth rate could thus be harmoniously reconciled. This is a fair representation of the ambitions of English Fabian-directed social-democracy immediately postwar. What was left unvoiced was any consideration of shifting the balance of the sexual division of labour in the home. Nor was class mentioned. Although smoothed out into the uniform blandness of 'the community' or 'society', the fact was that badly-paid, unskilled working-class women were to be encouraged into fulltime housewifery, while only better-paid women who could afford to buy the services of others could be sanctioned as part-time workers. That this was also an effective class division went unsaid. The 1946 Equal Pay Commission did not recommend the introduction of equal pay for manual workers, although the aim of the 1947 production drive was the recruitment of unskilled and semi-skilled women workers including those with children, into industry, particularly textiles. As an effect of the ambitions of the social democrats of the family, certain mothers would be free to work and others would be free not to work: in the hopes of the Ministry of Labour, working class mothers would resume or go on working without any fresh provision of means, like childcare, to help them do so.

PART III. CONCLUDING SUGGESTIONS

On the question of whether the wartime employment of married women contributed to the advance of women as workers, the particular combination of the universal postwar pronatalism plus the undifferentiating tones of social democracy was deadly. For women were, rhetorically, both overinstalled as mothers and de-sexed as workers. There was little to meet the practical needs of working mothers, although many women with children did indeed gradually go out to unskilled and semi-skilled light industrial work more and more. All this fitted in very well with the actual conditions and forms of women's work during the war years, where everything accentuated the sense of 'for the duration only'. Far from war work serving to revolutionise the terms of women's employment on any serious level, it was itself characterised as an

exceptional and valiant effort, which women could thankfully sink away from in peacetime. This process got well underway by the mid-1950s. Sociological commentaries stated that women had freely withdrawn from paid work, despite the fact that such a withdrawal was neither 'free' nor neatly occurring anyway. Popular psychological writings, drawing on the 'evidence' of the war nurseries, evoked the dangers of separating mothers and children and claimed that the experiences of war had proved a vindication of the emotional health of unified family life. One representative 1960s history of the welfare services echoes this:

Psychologists, studying the social phenomena of war, gave scientific warrant to the need for family life in development, which mankind had always instinctively known, and the Ministry of Health, surveying the working of evacuation, acknowledged from its experience the impossibility of finding a substitute... [Restoring the family] was the policy that underlay the great Children Act of 1948.⁽¹⁴³⁾

But such references to the 'evidence' of evacuation and nurseries construct a misleading history. War nurseries were not closed directly because of the findings of psychologists like Bowlby (although certainly this work did make a strong, but different, entry into the later abandonment of State provision of childcare).

Despite the hopes and retrospective claims made for the didactic value of the war experiences of mothers and children, no systematic studies were ever carried out. Appeals to the authority of the 'lessons of war' in fact hook up with the established pre-war body of European and American psychoanalytically-influenced work on the dangers of institutionalising children in orphanages and hospitals.⁽¹⁴⁴⁾ But the claim of the 1950s is for the irreducible evidence derived from the 'facts' of the war years of the dangers of women going out to work. If the postwar literature of family sociopsychology is read now as truly descriptive of 'the experience of the war', then that would imply a series of smooth and rational transitions through from psychological 'knowledge' to the practices of welfare policies and social work. It would suggest that 'the State' acted on the family according to the dictates of child and maternal psychology which had drawn on the evidence of the war years. But what happens in practice is a constant mutual appealing from history to psychology and back, which results in a web of cross-reference. To take this as genuinely indicative of anything independently accurate would be misleading: what is needed instead is a means of understanding the construction and effects of that web.

The complication here is that the density of representation which we set about stripping down is, at the same time, both our inheritance from the 1950s and the context in which we formulate questions about the 1940s. For instance, with regard to the relation of the State to women and children, my approach was determined by attributions which it was then necessary to query. The heritage of a politics of socialism and feminism out of the late 1960s and the 1970s is a set of suppositions about the standing of the State vis-à-vis the family: as above, for example, in the notion that the postwar government used Bowlby's theory of 'maternal deprivation' to get British women out of their jobs and back into their kitchens. This received, but inaccurate, history, which has fuelled so much indignation among feminists over the collusion of Science and State at the expense of women, has strengthened a version of 'ideology' which seemed able to claim the experiences of 1945 to 1947 as evidence for itself. The political attitudes which inspired that indignant curiosity were themselves necessarily founded on the same attributions which the 1950s had made about the 1940s, even if they were

inverted in political tone. Undoing those attributions meant pulling apart some of the political axioms which had determined the questions in the first place: notably the assumption that you could start with a 'State' which acted on the 'family' from above in a straightforward manner.

One move tempting to make in reaction to the inaccuracies of claims about 'the experience of the war' and what it showed about 'the need for family life', is to use the same evidence for opposite ends. So, for example, one could take women's responses to the surveys for the Ministry of Reconstruction and Labour mentioned above and try to reinterpret them, re-reading them so as to make them 'really' speak as one would prefer. One could pick up ambiguities and hesitations in women's replies and try to recapture them for one's own side, drawing them across the line to rejoin 'us', where they really always were. This enticing enterprise can be helped along, too, by a seemingly 'materialist' method of working: (the method that the earlier descriptive sections in this paper went in for, and then later drew back from). That is, answering questions about why, for instance, many younger women were apparently glad to anticipate abandoning work for marriage by pointing out all the practical conditions which surrounded this way of speaking. One could describe the uninviting nature of the available work, the low degree of skill and unionisation, and the weight of the prospect of untrained years in the factory offset by hope in the saving grace of marriage. Or one could even sidestep by commenting that really after all women did not withdraw from work anyway.

This sort of 'materialist' tack is a necessary one – some version of it is an essential starting-point, if done in full recognition of its risks and limits. The anxiety I have felt about using it to undermine the surface obviousness of a response from 1945 like 'I shan't want to work when I'm married' lies in the inadequacy of its approach to subjectivity. ('Subjectivity' in the broadest sense, as Luisa Passerini uses it in her article, 'Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism': 'attitudes, behaviour, language, a sense of identity' and how these are susceptible to coercion).⁽¹⁴⁵⁾ A fully historical materialism would need to address this problem of understanding subjectivity somehow.

In the absence of this possibility, I have sensed my work oscillating between two explanatory models, the one of saying, 'women really did want to work, they did want nurseries; if we read the responses to these flat questionnaires correctly we can surely decipher these wishes, or we can uncover the buried evidence of meetings, demonstrations and petitions to reveal their wants'. And the second saying: 'well, no wonder women were on the whole indifferent: what else, given these political conditions and work circumstances, could these women have done in 1945?' Both these explanatory models carry a certain amount of truth; but the truth can't rest comfortably between them. Not because it is not possible to reconcile these paradigms *in the abstract*, but because in practice they stand for and attract other attitudes.

On the one hand, the attempt to uncover real wishes can slip into presuming a clear and well-formed set of wants, of a 'progressive' cast at that; so that the struggle for now is to correctly read responses from the past, between the lines even, and give them a framework in which they can speak out unambiguously. The supposition, for instance, that if you could only put the right questions to women industrial workers in 1945 about their work aims, then they would speak truly, demonstrating through their dissatisfactions their latent socialist consciousness. But the trouble with the attempt to lay bare the red heart of truth beneath the discolourations and encrustations of 30-odd years on, is that it assumes a clear space out of which voices can speak. As if, that is,

ascertaining ‘consciousness’ stopped at scraping off history. That is not, of course, to discredit *what people say* as such, or to imply that considering the expression of wants is pointless. The difficulty is that needs and wants are never pure and undetermined in such a way that they could be fully revealed by stripping away a patina of historical postscripts and rewritings, to shine out with an absolute clarity. There is the space of language and desire which this conception of reading off an original consciousness forgets.

But on the other hand, some kinds of materialist explanations which skip the search for true need in favour of pragmatic accounts of the apparent conservatism of people’s behaviour have serious deficiencies too. Explanations of the form, ‘what else under these practical circumstances could people have done’ are essential but incomplete: because they have nothing to say about desires, hesitation, cynicism, or self-conceptions on the part of the historical actors. Because of this indifference to the problems of subjectivity, even explicitly and polemically socialist forms of this materialist approach invite in neighbours they wouldn’t care for. The theory of collusion, for instance – exemplified (at its simplest) in ‘women collude in their own oppression’ – presents explanatory shortcuts of a dangerously psychologising kind. It is this kind of theory which can rush in to act as a ‘completion’ of materialist pragmatics.

Versions of this collusion idea are occasionally raised as a refusal of the ‘heroinisation’ of women and as an insistence that women will only step into history if allowed to be fully marked by their culpability, which then has to be accounted for. The Italian Marxist writer, Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, does this in her article, ‘Female Sexuality and Fascist Ideology’⁽¹⁴⁶⁾ where she treats the question of a seemingly gender-privileged ‘consent’ to fascism by Italian women. It might be thought that these suppositions could be contested by a materialist account, yet most materialisms in fact act to support them by leaving doors open. For instance, socialist versions of the ‘home as refuge from the harsh world’ school of apologetics might describe periods of retrenchment and the conservatising of daily life, as in post-Bolshevik Russia or National Socialist Germany, as inevitable, given the rigorous material conditions of the time. Doing so, they are with the best of intentions, and with the sanction of Trotsky in *The Revolution Betrayed*⁽¹⁴⁷⁾ acting as kindly variants of collusion theory. They seek to let people off from the charge of ‘reactionary’ desires to go back to the warm privacy of the home by redescribing them as materially-based. For accusation, materialism is substituted, and an imaginative and sensitive materialism at that.

But the generosity of materialist pragmatics here is premature: its kindness can serve to mask the possibilities of real dissent, real resistance, voiced or not, on the part of those whose behaviours it seeks to excuse. It forgets that desires can be contradictory; and forgets, too, that the home can hardly constitute a refuge for those who were always there, as providers and housekeepers and childcarers, at the heart of it anyway. Because it has no opinions on the matter of subjectivity, it has nothing to say to the problem of ‘consent’ to a reactionary social order. Instead it merely *writes all over it*: it covers it with the elaborations of practical detail. And so it leaves the way open for theories of collusion to be tacked, not inharmoniously, on. I can only suggest that, to a materialist-realistic explanation of seemingly conservative drifts in domestic organisation, two further steps could replace the home-as-refuge treatment. The first would be the refusal to take ‘the family’ as a unitary object for investigation anyway. The second would be an attempt to examine the exact nature of the gaps, at particular times, between, say

psychology: social policy
 social policy: social practice
 propaganda: people's behaviour:
 policies: their enactment: people's acceptance

Each of the colons in this sample list marks a point where a relation of *derivation* is conventionally claimed or assumed: policy flowing into practice, for example.

But social practice cannot be read off from social policy, or even social consent from social practice. The whole range of speeches, articles, broadcasts, to 'the family' does not guarantee any acceptance, let alone a full complicity, with such notions on the part of their target: women, workers; whatever the movements of the birthrate, the presence of certain language in the world on its own does not guarantee a causal relation. There is also an opacity about similarities between the formulations of psychology and family-policy-making. The problem of agency remains, however, if one does not want to run into the analysis of 'strategies' which substitute for a functionalist State a dense network of generating powers. This may produce, in the end, a new functionalism, mysterious because of the dispersion of its causeless effects, its non-authorship the more remote and terrifying because its tracks are everywhere.⁽¹⁴⁸⁾

'The feminine sex', wrote Alva Myrdal, 'is a social problem'.⁽¹⁴⁹⁾ The final problem is of understanding social-sexual difference in 'progressive' or conservative ways: as transitionally produced and so susceptible to change, or as essential, guaranteed for all time. Human needs too can be understood either as the volatile products of a complexity of production, desires, consumption; or as the fixed products of social roles which generate them. One effect of the fixing and freezing of the Mother as a social category is to create an inflexible notion of needs as well, to accompany this social rôle. So a double social-sexual fixity is set up.

There is no clear theory of need available to us. The insistence on the historically-produced nature of needs in Marx is neither specific to Marxism, nor is it enough to constitute a theory. I've said both that people's needs can't be revealed by a simple process of historical unveiling, obviously enough, while elsewhere in these notes I've talked about the 'real needs' of mothers myself. I take it that it's necessary both to stress the non-self-evident nature of need and the complexities of its determinants, and also to act politically as if needs could be met; or at least met half-way. The benign if traditionally unimaginative face of 'socialist planning' is preferable to its known alternatives, however much its objects will always tend to be in excess of it and slip away.

Because the problematic business of exposing and illuminating 'the needs of mothers' starts out with gender at its most decisive and inescapable point – the biological capacity to bear children – there's the danger that it may fall back into a reactionary restating and confirming of social-sexual differences as timeless too.⁽¹⁵⁰⁾ This would entail making the needs of mothers into fixed properties of motherhood as a social function. I believe this is what happened in postwar Britain.

Understanding social-sexual difference entails being alert to the real effects of existing differences, which must be acknowledged as effects – instead of being prematurely absorbed into neutral categories like 'citizenship'. Such categories, systematically indifferent to gender, guarantee a return of the dominant order.⁽¹⁵¹⁾ And on the other hand, taking sexual difference as essential, to be rejoiced in, can be equally misconceived – whether from the standpoint of the chauvinistic 'vive là difference', or

certain feminist insistences on celebrating exclusion. Women as workers and women as reproductive social beings were understood in the most conservative ways in the last war. Women's war work, even in representations of their collective heroic capacities, was *women's work*, marked through and through by the gender of its performers, and consequently by the particular temporariness of the work of women who were mothers. In some obvious ways, all this weighting on gender is unsurprising. Only at an exceptional point of demand for all possible labour – the war economy – were large numbers of women, regardless of their reproductive status, made publicly visible as workers. But what could abstractly have been the moment to seize and push through the logic of sexual difference, through to the proper provision of childcare facilities and working conditions, was concretely impossible. Everything about the employment of married women in industry militated against their being taken seriously as real workers: by 1945 the dominant rhetoric held out an opposition between the mother and the woman worker. The postwar collapse of the war nurseries only underlined the 'special nature' of temporary concessions to working mothers. The coincidence of pronatalism with the end of the war intensified the 'facts' that all women were mothers or potential mothers, that all women were marriage-prone, that no-one had children who was not married. Hence two marginal presences: the spinster, the isolated professional woman who might utterly legitimately work and who deserved equal pay; and the unmarried mother, who resurfaces in the psycho-sociology of the early 1950s as 'pathologically disturbed'. While it was 'transitionally' necessary to insist on better conditions of housing and money in which to have children in 1945, the coincidence of this with the prominent rhetoric of the 'value of motherhood' blurred the needs of mothers with the essence of maternity in a way fatal for any real approach to the meeting of need.

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	legitimate	illegitimate	total
1930	706,728	36,632	743,360
1933	635,587	31,372	666,959
1935	655,802	30,882	686,684
1938	678,003	31,828	709,831
1940	645,799	30,724	676,523
1941	631,872	36,962	668,834
1944	784,699	62,720	847,419
1945	695,995	70,874	766,869
1946	864,302	60,823	925,125
1947	941,259	52,914	994,173
1961			965,000
1963-64			1000,000
1971-72	(from O.P. Censuses and Surveys)		862,000
1976-77			655,300

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